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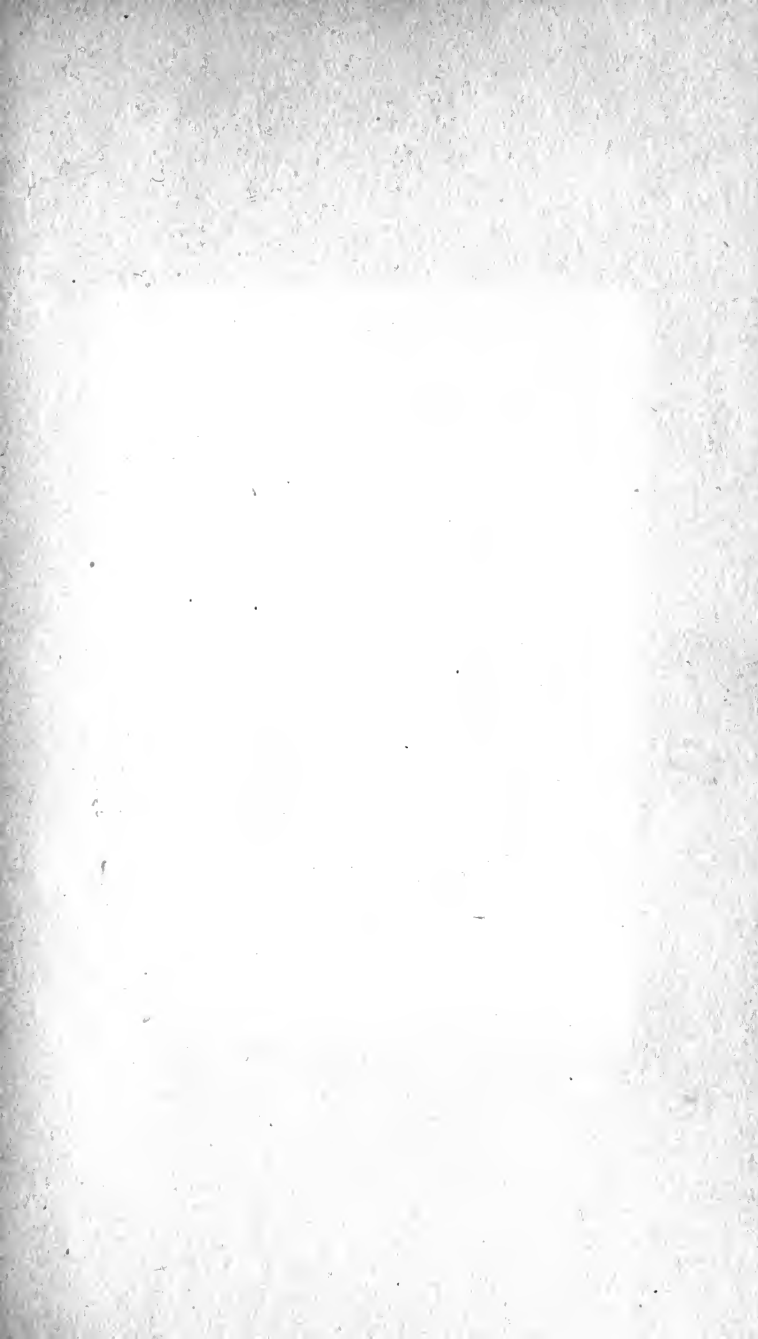
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JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY,” “OLIVE,”

&c. &c.

“And thus he bore, without abuse,
The grand old name of Gentleman.”

TENNYSON'S “IN MEMORIAM.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER I.

WE went home, leaving all that was mortal of our darling sleeping at Enderley, underneath the snows.

For twelve years after then, we lived at Longfield; in such unbroken, uneventful peace, that looking back seems like looking back over a level sea, whose leagues of tiny ripples make one smooth glassy plain.

Let me recall, as the first wave that rose, ominous of change,—a certain spring evening, when Mrs. Halifax and I were sitting, as was our wont, under the walnut-tree. The same

old walnut-tree, hardly a bough altered, though many of its neighbours and kindred had grown from saplings into trees—even as some of us had grown from children almost into young men.

“Edwin is late home from Norton Bury,” said Ursula.

“So is his father.”

“No—this is just John’s time. Hark ! there are the carriage-wheels !”

For Mr. Halifax, a prosperous man now, drove daily to and from his mills, in as tasteful an equipage as any of the country gentry between here and Enderley.

His wife went down to the stream to meet him, as usual, and they came up the field path together.

Both were changed from the John and Ursula Halifax of whom I last wrote. She, active and fresh-looking still, but settling into that fair largeness which is not unbecoming a lady of middle-age—he, inclined to a slight stoop, with the lines of his face more sharply, not to say painfully defined, and the hair worn

off his forehead up to the crown. Though still not a grey thread was discernible in the crisp locks at the back, which successively five little ones had pulled, and played with, and nestled in ; not a sign of age, as yet, in “ father’s curls.”

As soon as he had spoken to me, he looked round as usual for the children, and asked if the boys and Maud would be home to tea.

“ I think Guy and Walter never do come home in time when they go over to the Manor-house.”

“ They’re young—let them enjoy themselves,” said the father, smiling. “ And you know, love, of all your ‘fine’ friends, there are none you so heartily approve of as the Oldtowers.”

These were not of the former race. Good old Sir Ralph had gone to his rest, and Sir Herbert reigned in his stead ;—Sir Herbert, who in his dignified gratitude never forgot a certain election day when he first made the personal acquaintance of Mr. Halifax. The Manor-house family brought several other “ county families” to our notice, or us to theirs. These, when John’s

fortunes grew rapidly—as many another fortune grew, in the beginning of the thirty years' peace, when unknown, petty manufacturers first rose into merchant princes and cotton lords—these gentry made a perceptible distinction, often amusing enough to us, between John Halifax the tanner of Norton Bury, and Mr. Halifax, the prosperous owner of Enderley Mills. Some of them, too, were clever enough to discover, what a pleasant and altogether “visitable” lady was Mrs. Halifax, daughter of the late Mr. March, who had been a governor in the West Indies, and cousin of Mr. Brithwood of the Mythe. But Mrs. Halifax, with a certain tenacity of pride, altogether declined being visited as anything but Mrs. Halifax, wife of John Halifax, tanner, or mill-owner, or whatever he might be. All honour and all civilities that did not come through him, and with him, were utterly valueless to her.

To this her peculiarity was added another of John's own, namely, that all his life he had been averse to what is called “society;” had eschewed “acquaintances,” and—but most men

might easily count upon their fingers the number of those who, during a life-time, are found worthy of the sacred name of "friend." Consequently, our circle of associations was far more limited than that of many families holding an equal position with us—on which circumstance our neighbours commented a good deal. But little we cared; no more than we had cared for the chit-chat of Norton Bury. Our whole hearts were bound up within our own home — our happy Longfield.

"I do think this place is growing prettier than ever," said John, when, tea being over—a rather quiet meal, without a single child—we elders went out again to the walnut-tree bench. "Certainly, prettier than ever;" and his eye wandered over the quaint, low house, all odds and ends—for nearly every year something had been built, or something pulled down; then crossing the smooth bit of lawn, Jem Watkins' special pride, it rested on the sloping field, yellow with tall buttercups, wavy with growing grass. "Let me see—how long have we lived here? Phineas, you are the one for remembering

dates. What year was it we came to Longfield?"

"Eighteen hundred and twelve. Thirteen years ago."

"Ah, so long!"

"Not too long," said Mrs. Halifax, earnestly. "I hope we may end our days here. Do not you, John?"

He paused a little before answering. "Yes, I wish it; but I am not sure how far it would be right to do it."

"We will not open that subject again," said the mother, uneasily. "I thought we had all made up our minds, that little Longfield was a thousand times pleasanter than Beechwood, grand as it is. But John thinks he never can do enough for his people at Enderley."

"Not that alone, love. Other reasons combined. Do you know, Phineas," he continued, musingly, as he watched the sun set over Leckington Hill — "sometimes I fancy my life is too easy—that I am not a wise steward of the riches that have multiplied so fast. By fifty, a man so blest as I have been, ought to have done

something really of use in the world—and I am actually forty-five. Once, I hoped to have done wonderful things ere I was forty-five. But somehow, the desire faded.”

His wife and I were silent. We both knew the truth ; that calm as had flowed his outer existence, in which was omitted not one actual duty, still, for these twelve years, all the high aims which make the glory and charm of life as duties make its strength, all the active energies and noble ambitions which especially belong to the prime of manhood, in him had been, not dead perhaps, but sleeping. Sleeping, beyond the power of any human voice to waken them, under the daisies of a child’s grave at Enderley.

I know not if this was right—but it was scarcely unnatural. In that heart, which loved as few men love, and remembered as few men remember—so deep a wound could never be thoroughly healed. A certain something in him seemed different ever after, as if a portion of the father’s own life had been taken away with Muriel, and lay buried in the little dead bosom of his first-born, his dearest child.

“ You forget,” said Mrs. Halifax, tenderly—
“ you forget, John, how much you have been doing, and intend to do. What with your improvements at Enderley, and your Catholic Emancipation—your Abolition of Slavery and your Parliamentary Reform — why, there is hardly a scheme for good, public or private, to which you do not lend a helping hand.”

“ A helping purse, perhaps, which is an easier thing—much.”

“ I will not have you blaming yourself. Ask Phineas, there — our household Solomon.”—
(Which it was very kind of the mother to believe me.)—“ Uncle Phineas, what better could John have done in all these years, than look after his mills, and educate his three sons ?”

“ Have them educated, rather,” corrected he, sensitive, and yet honestly proud over his own hardly-gained acquirements. Yet this feeling had made him doubly careful to give his boys every possible advantage of study—short of sending them from home, to which he had an invincible objection. And three finer lads, or better educated, could not be found in the whole county.

"I think, John, Guy has quite got over his fancy of going to Cambridge, with Ralph Oldtower."

"Yes ; college life would not have done for Guy," said the father, thoughtfully.

"Hush ! we must not talk about them, for here come the children."

It was now a mere figure of speech to call them so, though, in their home-taught, loving simplicity, they would neither have been ashamed nor annoyed at the epithet—these two tall lads, who in the dusk looked as man-like as their father.

"Where is your sister, boys?"

"Maud stopped at the stream with Edwin," answered Guy, rather carelessly. His heart had kept its childish faith ; the youngest, pet as she was, was never anything to him but "little Maud." One—whom the boys still talked of, softly and tenderly, in fireside evening talks, when the winter winds came and the snow was falling—one only was ever spoken of by Guy as his "sister."

Maud, or Miss Halifax, as from the first she

was naturally called—as naturally as our lost darling was never called anything else than Muriel — came up, hanging on Edwin’s arm, which she was fond of doing, both because it happened to be the only arm low enough to suit her childish stature, and because she was more especially “Edwin’s girl,” and had been so always. She had grown out of the likeness that we longed for in her cradle-days, or else we had grown out of the perception of it ; for though the external resemblance in hair and complexion still remained, nothing could be more unlike in spirit than this sprightly elf, at once the plague and the pet of the family—to our Muriel.

“Edwin’s girl ” stole away with him, merrily chattering. Guy sat down beside his mother, and slipped his arm round her waist. They still fondled her with a child-like simplicity—these her almost grown-up sons ; who had never been sent to school for a day, and had never learned from other sons of far different mothers, that a young man’s chief manliness ought to consist in despising the tender charities of home.

“Guy, you foolish boy!” as she took his cap off and pushed back his hair, trying not to look proud of his handsome face, “what have you been doing all day?”

“Making myself agreeable, of course, mother.”

“That he has,” corroborated Walter, whose great object of hero worship was his eldest brother. “He talked with Lady Oldtower, and he sang with Miss Oldtower and Miss Grace. Never was there such a fellow as our Guy.”

“Nonsense!” said his mother, while Guy only laughed, too accustomed to this family admiration to be much disconcerted or harmed thereby.

“When does Ralph return to Cambridge?”

“Not at all. He is going to leave college, and be off to help the Greeks. Father, do you know everybody is joining the Greeks? Even Lord Byron is off with the rest. I only wish I were.”

“Heaven forbid!” muttered the mother.

“Why not? I should have made a capital soldier, and liked it too, better than anything.”

“Better than being my right hand at the

mills and your mother's at home?—Better than growing up to be our eldest son, our comfort and our hope?—I think not, Guy.”

“ You are right, father,” was the answer, with an uneasy look. For this description seemed less what Guy was, than what we desired him to be. With his easy, happy temper, generous but uncertain, and his showy, brilliant parts, he was not nearly so much to be depended on as the grave Edwin, who was already a thorough man of business, and plodded between Enderley mills and a smaller one which had taken the place of the flour mill at Norton Bury, with indomitable perseverance.

Guy fell into a brown study, not unnoticed by those anxious eyes, which lingered oftener upon his face than on that of any of her sons. Mrs. Halifax said, in her quick, decisive way, that it was “ time to go in.”

So the sunset picture outside changed to the home-group within ; the mother sitting at her little table, where the tall silver candlestick shed a subdued light on her work-basket that never was empty and her busy fingers that never were

still. The father sat beside her ; he kept his old habit of liking to have her close to him ; ay, even though he was falling into the middle-aged comforts of an arm-chair and a newspaper. There he sat, sometimes reading aloud, or talking ; sometimes lazily watching her, with silent, loving eyes, that saw beauty in his old wife still.

The young folk scattered themselves about the room. Guy and Walter at the unshuttered window—we had a habit of never hiding our home-light—were looking at the moon, and laying bets, *sotto voce*, upon how many minutes she would be in climbing over the oak on the top of One-tree Hill. Edwin sat, reading hard—his shoulders up to his ears, and his fingers stuck through his hair, developing the whole of his broad, knobbed, knotted forehead, where, Maud declared, the wrinkles had already begun to show. For Mistress Maud herself, she flitted about in all directions, interrupting everything, and doing nothing.

“ Maud,” said her father at last, “ I am afraid you give a great deal of trouble to Uncle Phineas.”

Uncle Phineas tried to soften the fact, but the little lady was certainly the most trying of his pupils. Her mother she had long escaped from, for the advantage of both. For, to tell truth while in the invisible atmosphere of moral training the mother's influence was invaluable, in the minor branch of lesson-learning, there might have been found many a better teacher than Ursula Halifax. So the children's education was chiefly left to me; other tutors succeeding as was necessary; and it had just begun to be considered whether a lady governess ought not to "finish" the education of Miss Halifax. But always at home. Not for all the knowledge and all the accomplishments in the world, would these parents have suffered either son or daughter—living souls entrusted to them by the Divine Father—to be brought up anywhere out of their own sight, out of the shelter and safeguard of their own natural home.

"Love, when I was waiting to-day in Jessop's bank——"

(Ah! that was another change, to which we were even yet not familiar, the passing away of

our good doctor and his wife, and his brother and heir turning the old dining-room into a "County Bank—open from ten till four.")

"While waiting there, I heard of a lady who struck me as likely to be an excellent governess for Maud."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Halifax, not over-enthusiastically. Maud became eager to know "what the lady was like?" I at the same time inquiring "who was she?"

"Who? I really did not ask," John answered, smiling. "But of what she is, Jessop gave me first-rate evidence—a good daughter, who teaches in Norton Bury anybody's children for any sort of pay, in order to maintain an ailing mother. Ursula, you would let her teach our Maud, I know?"

"Is she an Englishwoman?" — For Mrs. Halifax, prejudiced by a certain French lady who had for a few months completely bouleversed the Manor-house, and even slightly tainted her own favourite, pretty Grace Oldtower, had received coldly this governess plan from the beginning. "Would she have to live with us?"

“ I think so, decidedly.”

“ Then it can't be. The house will not accommodate her. It will hardly hold even ourselves. No, we cannot take in anybody else at Longfield.”

“ But—we may have to leave Longfield.”

The boys here turned to listen ; for this question had already been mooted, as all family questions were. In our house we had no secrets : the young folk, being trusted, were ever trustworthy ; and the parents, clear-handed and pure-hearted, had nothing that they were afraid to tell their children.

“ Leave Longfield !” repeated Mrs. Halifax ; “ surely—surely—” But glancing at her husband, her tone of impatience ceased.

He sat gazing into the fire with an anxious air.

“ Don't let us discuss that question—at least, not to-night. It troubles you, John. Put it off till to-morrow.”

No, that was never his habit. He was one of the very few who, a thing being to be done, will not trust it to uncertain “ to-morrows.” His

wife saw at once that he wanted to talk to her, and listened.

“Yes, it does trouble me a good deal. Whether, now that our children are growing up, and our income is doubling and trebling year by year, we ought to widen our circle of usefulness, or close it up permanently within the quiet bound of little Longfield. Love, which say you?”

“The latter, the latter—because it is far the happiest.”

“I am afraid, *not* the latter, because it *is* the happiest.”

He spoke gently, laying his hand on his wife's shoulder, and looking down on her with that peculiar look which he always had when telling her things that he knew were sore to hear. I never saw that look on any living face save John's; but I have seen it once in a picture—of two Huguenot lovers. The woman is trying to fasten round the man's neck the white badge that will save him from the massacre (of St. Bartholomew)—he clasping her the while, gently puts it aside—not stern, but smiling. That quiet,

tender smile, firmer than any frown, will, you feel sure, soon control the woman's anguish, so that she will sob out—any faithful woman would—"Go, die! Dearer to me than even thyself are thy honour and thy duty!"

When I saw this noble picture, it touched to the core this old heart of mine—for the painter, in that rare expression, might have caught John's. Just as in a few crises of his life I have seen it, and especially in this one, when he first told to his wife that determination which he had slowly come to—that it was both right and expedient for us to quit Longfield—our happy home for so many years, of which the mother loved every flower in the garden, every nook and stone in the walls.

"Leave Longfield!" she repeated again with a bitter sigh.

"Leave Longfield!" echoed the children, first the youngest, then the eldest, but rather in curiosity than regret. Edwin's keen bright eyes were just lifted from his book, and fell again; he was not a lad of much speech, or much demonstration of any kind.

"Boys, come and let us talk over the matter."

They came at once and joined in the circle ; respectfully, yet with entire freedom, they looked towards their father—these, the sons of his youth, to whom he had been from their birth not only parent and head, but companion, guide, and familiar friend. They honoured him, they trusted him, they loved him ; not, perhaps, in the way that they—at least, some of them—loved their mother, for it often seems Nature's own ordinance, that a mother's influence should be strongest over her sons, while the father's heart yearns most over his daughters. But even a stranger could not glance from each to each of those attentive faces, so different, yet with a curious "family look" running through them all, without seeing in what deep, reverent affection, such as naturally takes the place of childish fondness, these youths held their father.

"Yes, I am afraid, after much serious thought on the matter, and much consultation with your mother here,—that we ought to leave Longfield."

"So think I," said Mistress Maud, from her foot-stool ; which putting forward of her im-

portant opinion shook us all from gravity to merriment, that compelled even Mrs. Halifax to join. Then, laying aside her work, and with it the saddened air with which she had bent over it, she drew her chair closer to her husband, slipping her hand in his, and leaning against his shoulder. Upon which Guy, who had at first watched his mother anxiously, doubtful whether or no his father's plan had her approval, and therefore ought to be assented to,—relapsed into satisfied, undivided attention.

“I have again been over Beechwood Hall. You all remember Beechwood?”

Yes. It was the “great house” at Enderley, just on the slope of the hill, below Rose Cottage. The beechwood itself was part of its pleasure-ground, and from its gardens honest James Tod, who had them in keeping, had brought many a pocket-full of pears for the boys, many a sweet-scented nosegay for Muriel.

“Beechwood has been empty a great many years, father? Would it be a safe investment to buy it?”

“I think so, Edwin, my practical lad,” answered the father, smiling. “What say you, children? Would you like living there?”

Each one made his or her comment. Guy’s countenance brightened at the notion of “lots of shooting and fishing” about Enderley, especially at Luxmore; and Maud counted on the numerous visitors that would come to John Halifax, Esquire, of Beechwood Hall.

“Neither of which excellent reasons happen to be your father’s,” said Mrs. Halifax, shortly. But John,—often tenderer over youthful frivolities than she, answered,

“I will tell you, boys, what are my reasons. When I was a young man, before your mother and I were married, indeed before I had ever seen her, I had strongly impressed on my mind the wish to gain influence in the world—riches if I could—but at all events, influence. I thought I could use it well, better than most men; those can best help the poor who understand the poor. And I can; since, you know, when Uncle Phineas found me, I was—”

“Father,” said Guy, flushing scarlet, “we

may as well pass over that fact. We are gentle-folks now."

"We always were, my son."

The rebuke, out of its very mildness, cut the youth to the heart. He dropped his eyes, colouring now with a different and a holier shame.

"I know that. Please, will you go on, father?"

"And now," the father continued, speaking as much out of his own thoughts as aloud to his children—"now, twenty-five years of labour have won for me the position I desired. That is, I might have it for the claiming. I might take my place among the men who have lately risen from the people, to guide and help the people—the Cannings, Huskissons, Peels."

"Would you enter parliament? Sir Herbert asked me to-day if you ever intended it. He said, there was nothing you might not attain to, if you would give yourself up entirely to politics."

"No, Guy, no. Wisdom, like charity, begins at home. Let me learn to rule in my own valley, among my own people, before I attempt to guide the state. And that brings me back

again to the pros and cons about Beechwood Hall."

"Tell them, John; tell all out plainly to the children."

The reasons were—first, the advantage of the boys themselves; for John Halifax was not one of those philanthropists who would benefit all the world except their own household and their own kin. He wished—since the higher a man rises, the wider and nobler grows his sphere of usefulness—not only to lift himself, but his sons after him;—lift them high enough to help on the ever-advancing tide of human improvement, among their own people first, and thence extending outward in the world whithersoever their talents or circumstances might call them.

"I understand," cried the eldest son, his eyes sparkling; "you want to found a family. And so it shall be—we will settle at Beechwood Hall; all coming generations shall live to the honour and glory of your name—our name—"

"My boy, there is only one Name to whose honour we should all live. One Name 'in whom all the generations of the earth are blessed.'

In thus far only do I wish to 'found a family,' as you call it, that our light may shine before men—that we may be a city set on a hill—that we may say plainly unto all that ask us, 'For me and my house we will serve the Lord.' ”

It was not often that John Halifax spoke thus; adopting solemnly the literal language of the Book—his and our life's guide, no word of which was ever used lightly in our family. We all listened, as in his earnestness he rose, and standing upright in the fire-light, spoke on.

“I believe, with His blessing, that one may 'serve the Lord' as well in wealth as in poverty, in a great house as in a cottage like this. I am not doubtful, even though my possessions are increased. I am not afraid of being a rich man. Nor a great man neither, if I were called to such a destiny.”

“It may be—who knows?” said Ursula, softly.

John caught his wife's eyes, and smiled.

“Love, you were a true prophet once, with a certain 'Yes, you will,' but now—Children, you know when I married your mother I had

nothing, and she gave up everything for me. I said, I would yet make her as high as any lady in the land,—in fortune I then meant, thinking it would make her happier ; but she and I are wiser now. We know that we never can be happier than we were in the old house at Norton Bury, or in this little Longfield. By making her lady of Beechwood I should double her responsibilities and treble her cares ; give her an infinitude of new duties, and no pleasures half so sweet as those we leave behind. Still, of herself and for herself, my wife shall decide.”

Ursula looked up at him ; tears stood in her eyes, though through them shone all the steadfastness of faithful love. “ Thank you, John. I have decided. If you wish it, if you think it right, we will leave Longfield and go to Beechwood.”

He stooped and kissed her forehead, saying only—“ We will go.”

Guy looked up, half-reproachfully, as if the father were exacting a sacrifice ; but I question whether the greater sacrifice were not his who took rather than hers who gave.

So all was settled—we were to leave beloved

Longfield. It was to be let, not sold ; let to a person we knew, who would take jealous care of all that was ours, and we might come back and see it continually ; but it would be ours—our own home—no more.

Very sad—sadder even than I had thought—was the leaving all the familiar things ; the orchard and the flower-garden, the meadow and the stream, the woody hills beyond, every line and wave of which was pleasant and dear almost as our children's faces. Ay, almost as that face which for a year—one little year, had lived in sight of, but never beheld their beauty ; the child who one spring day had gone away merrily out of the white gate with her three brothers, and never came back to Longfield any more.

Perhaps this circumstance, that her fading away and her departure happened away from home, was the cause why her memory—the memory of our living Muriel, in all her human childhood—afterwards clung more especially about the house at Longfield. The other children altered, imperceptibly yet so swiftly, that from year to year we half forgot

their old likenesses. But Muriel's never changed. Her image, only a shade, yet often more real than any of these living children, seemed perpetually among us. It crept through the house at dusk; in winter fire-light it sat smiling in dim corners; in spring mornings it moved about the garden borders, with tiny soft footsteps neither seen nor heard. The others grew up—would be men and women shortly—but the one child that “was not,” remained to us always a child.

I thought, even the last evening—the very last evening that John returned from Enderley, and his wife went down to the stream to meet him, and they came up the park together, as they had done for so many, many years;—ay, even then I thought I saw his eyes turn to the spot where a little pale figure used to sit on the door-sill, listening and waiting for him, with her dove in her bosom. We never kept doves now.

And the same night, when all the household was in bed—even the mother, who had gone about all day with a restless activity, trying to

persuade herself that there would be at least no possibility of accomplishing the flitting to-morrow—the last night, when John went as usual to fasten the house-door, he stood a long time outside, looking down the valley.

“How quiet everything is. You can almost hear the tinkle of the stream. Poor old Longfield!” And I sighed, thinking we should never again have such another home.

John did not answer. He had been mechanically bending aside and training into its place a long shoot of wild clematis—virgin’s-bower, which Guy and Muriel had brought in from the fields and planted, a tiny root; it covered the whole front of the house now. Then he came and leaned beside me over the wicket-gate, looking fixedly up into the moonlight blue.

“I wonder if she knows we are leaving Longfield?”

“Who?” said I; for the moment forgetting.

“The child.”

CHAPTER II.

FATHER and son—a goodly sight, as they paced side by side up and down the gravel walk—(alas! the pretty field-path belonged to days that were!)—up and down the broad, sunshiny walk, in front of the breakfast-room windows of Beechwood Hall.

It was early—little past eight o'clock; but we kept Longfield hours and Longfield ways still. And besides, this was a grand day—the day of Guy's coming of age. Curious it seemed to watch him, as he walked along by his father, looking every inch "the young heir;" and perhaps not unconscious that he did so;—curious enough, remembering how meekly the boy had come into the world, at a certain old house at Norton Bury, one rainy December morning, twenty-one years ago.

It was a bright day to-day—bright as all our faces were, I think, as we gathered round the cosy breakfast-table. There, as heretofore, it was the mother's pride and the father's pleasure that not one face should be missing—that, summer and winter, all should assemble for an hour of family fun and family chat, before the busy cares of the day; and by general consent, which had grown into habit, every one tried to keep unclouded this little bit of early sunshine, before the father and brothers went away. No sour or dreary looks, no painful topics were ever brought to the breakfast-table.

Thus, it was against all custom, when Mr. Halifax, laying down his newspaper with a grave countenance, said—

“This is very ill news. Ten Bank failures in the Gazette to-day.”

“But it will not harm us, father.”

“Edwin is always thinking of ‘us,’ and ‘our business,’” remarked Gay, rather sharply. It was one of the slight—the very slight—jars in our household, that these two lads, excellent lads both, as they grew into manhood did not exactly “pull together.”

“Edwin is scarcely wrong in thinking of ‘us,’ since upon us depend so many,” observed the father, in that quiet tone with which, when he did happen to interfere between his sons, he generally smoothed matters down and kept the balance even. “Yet, though we are ourselves secure, I trust, the losses everywhere around us make it the more necessary that we should not parade our good fortune by launching out into any of Guy’s magnificences—eh, my boy?”

The youth looked down. It was well known in the family, that since we came to Beechwood his pleasure-loving temperament had wanted all sorts of improvements on our style of living—fox-hounds, dinner-parties, balls; that the father’s ways, which, though extended to liberal hospitalities, forbade outside show, and made our life a thorough family life still—were somewhat distasteful to that most fascinating young gentleman, Guy Halifax, Esquire, heir of Beechwood Hall.

“You may call it ‘magnificence,’ or what you choose; but I know I should like to live a little more as our neighbours do. And I think

we ought, too—we, that are known to be the wealthiest family—”

He stopped abruptly—for the door opened; and Guy had too much good taste and good feeling, to discuss our riches before Maud’s poor governess—the tall, grave, sad-looking, sad-clothed Miss Silver; the same whom John had seen at Mr. Jessop’s bank; and who had been with us four months—ever since we came to Beechwood.

One of the boys rose and offered her a chair; for the parents set the example of treating her with entire respect—nay, would gladly have made her altogether one of the family, had she not been so very reserved.

Miss Silver came forward with the daily nosegay which Mrs. Halifax had confided to her superintendence.

“They are the best I can find, madam—I believe Watkins keeps all his greenhouse flowers for to-night.”

“Thank you, my dear. These will do very well.—Yes, Guy, persuade Miss Silver to take your place. She looks so cold.”

But Miss Silver, declining the kindness,

passed on to her own seat opposite, away from the fire.

Ursula busied herself over the breakfast equipage, rather nervously. Though an admirable person, Miss Silver in her extreme and all but repellent quietness was one whom the mother found it difficult to get on with. She was scrupulously kind to her: and the governess was as scrupulously exact in all courtesy and attention; still that impassible, self-contained demeanour, that great reticence—it might be shyness, it might be pride,—sometimes, Ursula privately admitted, “fidgetted” her.

To-day was to be a general holiday for both masters and servants; a dinner at the mills; and in the evening something which, though we called it a tea-drinking, began to look, I was amused to see, exceedingly like “a ball.” But on this grand occasion both parents had yielded to their young people’s wishes, and half the neighbourhood had been invited by the universally-popular Mr. Guy Halifax, to celebrate his coming of age.

“Only once in a way,” said the mother, half

ashamed of herself for thus indulging the boy—as giving his shoulder a fond shake, she called him “a foolish fellow.”

Then we all dispersed; Guy and Walter to ride to the Manor-house, Edwin vanishing with his sister, to whom he was giving daily Latin lessons in the school-room.

John asked me to take a walk on the hill with him.

“Go, Phineas,” whispered his wife—“it will do him good. And don’t let him talk too much of old times. This is a hard week for him.”

The mother’s eyes were mournful, for Guy and “the child” had been born within a year and three days of each other; but she never hinted—it never would have struck her to hint—“this is a hard week for *me*.”

That grief—the one great grief of their life, had come to her more wholesomely than to her husband: either because men, the very best of them, can only suffer, while women can endure; or because in the mysterious ordinance of nature Maud’s baby lips had sucked away the

bitterness of the pang from the bereaved mother, while her loss was yet new. It had never been left to rankle in that warm heart, which had room for every living child, while it cherished, in a tenderness above all sorrow, the child that was no more.

John and I, in our walk, stood a moment by the low church-yard wall, and looked over at that plain white stone, where was inscribed her name, "Muriel Joy Halifax,"—a line out of that New Testament miracle-story she delighted in, "*Whereas I was blind, now I see,*"—and the date when *she saw*. Nothing more: it was not needed.

"December 5, 1813," said the father, reading the date. "She would have been quite a woman now. How strange! My little Muriel!"

And he walked thoughtfully along, almost in the same footprints where he had been used to carry his darling up the hill-side to the brow of Enderley Flat. He seemed in fancy to bear her in his arms still—this little one, whom, as I have before said, Heaven in its compensating mercy, year by year, through all changes, had

made the one treasure that none could take away—the one child left to be a child for ever.

I think, as we rested in the self-same place, the sunshiny nook where we used to sit with her for hours together, the father's heart took this consolation so closely and surely into itself, that memory altogether ceased to be pain. He began talking about the other children—especially Maud, and then of Miss Silver, her governess.

“I wish she were more likeable, John. It vexes me sometimes to see how coldly she returns the mother's kindness.”

“Poor thing!—she has evidently not been used to kindness. You should have seen how amazed she looked yesterday, when we paid her a little more than her salary, and my wife gave her a pretty silk dress to wear to-night. I hardly knew whether she would refuse it, or burst out crying—in girlish fashion.”

“Is she a girl? Why, the boys say she looks thirty at least. Guy and Walter laugh amazingly at her dowdy dress and her solemn, haughty ways.”

“That will not do, Phineas. I must speak to them. They ought to make allowances for poor Miss Silver, of whom I think most highly.”

“I know you do; but do you heartily like her?”

“For most things, yes. And I sincerely respect her, or, of course, she would not be here. I think people should be as particular over choosing their daughter’s governess as their son’s wife; and having chosen, should show her almost equal honour.”

“You’ll have your sons choosing themselves wives soon, John. I fancy Guy has a soft place in his heart for that pretty Grace Oldtower.”

But the father made no answer. He was always tenacious over the lightest approach to such jests as these. And besides just at this moment Mr. Brown, Lord Luxmore’s steward, passed — riding solemnly along. He barely touched his hat to Mr. Halifax.

“Poor Mr. Brown! He has a grudge against me for those Mexican speculations I refused to embark in; he did, and lost everything but what he gets from Lord Luxmore. I do think,

Phineas, the country has been running mad this year after speculation. There is sure to come a panic afterwards, and indeed it seems already beginning."

"But you are secure? You have not joined in the mania, and the crash cannot harm you? Did I not hear you say, that you were not afraid of losing a single penny?"

"Yes—unfortunately," with a troubled smile.

"John, what do you mean?"

"I mean, that to stand upright while one's neighbours are falling on all sides, is a most trying position. Misfortune makes people unjust. The other day at the sessions, I got cold looks enough from my brother magistrates—looks that would have set my blood boiling twenty years ago. And—you saw in the Norton Bury Mercury that article about 'grasping plebeian millionaires'—'wool spinners, spinning out of their country's vitals.'—That's meant for me, Phineas. Don't look incredulous. Yes—for me."

"How disgraceful!"

"Perhaps so—but to them more than to me. I feel sorry, because of the harm it may

do me—especially among working people, who know nothing but what they hear and believe everything that is told them. They see I thrive and others fail—that my mills are the only cloth mills in full work, and I have more hands than I can employ. Every week I am obliged to send new comers away. Then they raise the old cry—that my machinery has ruined labour. So, you see, for all that Guy says about our prosperity, his father does not sleep exactly upon a bed of roses.”

“It is wicked—atrocious!”

“Not at all. Only natural—the penalty one has to pay for success, I suppose. It will die out most likely; meantime, we will mind it as little as we can.”

“But are you safe?—your life—” For a sudden fear crossed me—a fear not unwarranted by more than one event of this year—this terrible 1825.

“Safe?—Yes—” and his eyes were lifted, “I believe my life is safe—if I have work to do. Still, for others’ sake, I have carried this month past whenever I go to and from the Coltham bank, besides my cash box—this.”

He shewed me, peering out of his breast-pocket, a small pistol.

I was greatly startled.

“Does your wife know?”

“Of course. But she knows too, that nothing but the last extremity would force me to use it: also that my carrying it, and its being noised about that I do so, may prevent my ever having occasion to use it. God grant I never may! Don’t let us talk about this.”

He stopped, gazing with a sad abstraction down the sunshiny valley—most part of which was already his own property. For whatever capital he could spare from his business he never sunk in speculation, but took a patriarchal pleasure in investing it in land, chiefly for the benefit of his mills and those concerned therein.

“My poor people—they might have known me better! But I suppose one never attains one’s desire without its being leavened in some way. If there was one point I was anxious over in my youth, it was to keep up through life a name like the Chevalier Bayard—how folk

would smile to hear of a tradesman emulating Bayard—‘*Sans peur et sans reproche !*’ And so things might be—ought to be. So perhaps they shall be yet, in spite of this calumny.”

“How shall you meet it? What shall you do?”

“Nothing. Live it down.”

He stood still, looking across the valley to where the frosty line of the hill-tops met the steel-blue, steadfast sky. Yes, I felt sure he *would* “live it down.”

We dismissed the subject, and spent an hour or more in pleasant chat, about many things. Passing homeward through the beech-wood, where through the bare tree-tops a light snow was beginning to fall, John said, musingly,

“It will be a hard winter—we shall have to help our poor people a great deal. Christmas dinners will be much in request.”

“There’s a saying, that the way to an Englishman’s heart is through his stomach. So perhaps you’ll get justice by spring.”

“Don’t be angry, Phineas. As I tell my wife, it is not worth while. Half the wrongs

people do to us are through sheer ignorance. We must be patient. ‘*In your patience possess ye your souls.*’ ”

He said this, more to himself than aloud, as if carrying out the thread of his own thought. Mine, following it, and observing him, involuntarily turned to another passage in our Book of books, about the blessedness of some men, even when reviled and persecuted.

Ay, and for all his many cares, John Halifax looked like a man who was “blessed.”

Blessed, and happy too, throughout that day ; especially in the midst of the mill-yard dinner—which reminded me forcibly of that Feast, at which guests were gathered out of the highways and hedges—guests, such as John Halifax liked to have—guests, who could not, by any possibility, “recompense” him. Yet it did one’s heart good to hear the cheer that greeted the master, ay, and the young master too, who was to-day for the first time presented as such ;—as the firm was to be henceforward, “Halifax and Son.”

And full of smiling satisfaction was the father's look, when in the evening he stood in the midst of his children, waiting for "Guy's visitors," as he pertinaciously declared them to be—these fine people, for whose entertainment our house had been these three days turned upside down; the sober old dining-room converted into a glittering ball-room, and the entrance-hall a very "bower of blisse"—all green boughs and Chinese lanterns. John protested he should not have known his own study again; and that if these festive transformations were to happen frequently, he should soon not even know himself!

Yet for all that, and in spite of the comical horror he testified at this first bouleversement of our quiet home ways, I think he had a real pleasure in his children's delight; in wandering with them through the decorated rooms, tapestried with ivy and laurel, and arbor vitæ; in making them all pass in review before him, and admiring their handiwork and themselves.

A goodly group they made — our young folk: there were no "children" now—for even

Maud, who was tall and womanly for her age, had bloomed out in a ball dress, all white muslin and camellias, and appeared every inch 'Miss Halifax.' Walter too, had lately eschewed jackets and began to borrow razors; while Edwin, though still small, had a keen, old-man-like look, which made him seem—as he was, indeed, in character, the eldest of the three. Altogether they were "a fine family," such as any man might rejoice to see growing or grown up around him.

But my eyes naturally sought the father, as he stood among his boys, taller than any of them, and possessing far more than they that quality for which John Halifax had always been remarkable—dignity. True, Nature had favoured him beyond most men, giving him the stately handsome presence befitting middle age, throwing a kind of apostolic grace over the high, half-bald crown, and touching with a softened gray the still curly locks behind. But these were mere accidents; the true dignity lay in himself and his own personal character, independent of any exterior.

It was pleasant to watch him, and note how advancing years had given rather than taken away from, his outward mien. As ever, he was distinguishable from other men, even to his dress—which had something of the Quaker about it still, in its sober colour, its rarely-changed fashion, and its exceeding neatness. Mrs. Halifax used now and then to laugh at him for being so particular over his daintiest of cambric and finest of lawn—but secretly she took the greatest pride in his appearance.

“John looks well to-night,” she said, coming in and sitting down by me, her eyes following mine. One would not have guessed from their quiet gaze that she knew—what John had told me she knew, this morning. But these two in their perfect union had a wonderful strength—a wonderful fearlessness. And she had learned from him, what perhaps originally was foreign to her impressible and somewhat anxious mind—that steadfast faith, which, while ready to meet every ill when the time comes, until the time waits cheerfully, and will not disquiet itself in vain.

Thus, for all their cares, her face as well as his, was calm and bright. Bright, even with the prettiest girlish blush, when John came up to his wife and admired her—as indeed was not surprising.

She laughed at him, and declared she had always intended to grow lovely in her old age. “I thought I ought to dress myself grandly, too, on Guy’s birthday. Do you like me, John?”

“Very much: I like that black velvet gown, substantial, soft and rich, without any show. And that lace frill round your throat—what sort of lace is it?”

“Valenciennes. When I was a girl, if I had a weakness it was for black velvet and Valenciennes.”

John smiled, with visible pleasure that she had even a “weakness” gratified now. “And you have put on my brooch at last, I see.”

“Yes; but—” and she shook her head—“remember your promise!”

“Phineas, this wife of mine is a vain woman. She knows her own price is ‘far above rubies’—or diamonds either. No, Mrs. Halifax, be not afraid; I shall give you no more jewels.”

She did not need them. She stood amidst her three sons with the smile of a Cornelia. She felt her husband's eyes rest on her, with that quiet perfectness of love—better than any lovers' love—

“The fullness of a stream that knew no fall”—
the love of a husband who has been married nearly twenty-five years.

Here a troop of company arrived, and John left me to assume his duty as host.

No easy duty, as I soon perceived ; for times were hard, and men's minds troubled. Every one, except the light-heeled, light-hearted youngsters, looked grave.

Many yet alive remember this year 1825—the panic year. War having ceased, commerce, in its worst form, started into sudden and unhealthy overgrowth. Speculations of all kinds sprung up like fungi out of dead wood, flourished a little, and dropped away. Then came ruin, not of hundreds, but thousands, of all ranks and classes. This year, and this month in this year, the breaking of many established firms, especially bankers, foretold that the universal crash had just begun.

It was felt even in our retired country neighbourhood, and among our friendly guests this night, both gentle and simple—and there was a mixture of both, as only a man in Mr. Halifax's position could mix such heterogeneous elements—towns-people and country-people, dissenters and church folk, professional men and men of business. John dared to do it—and did it. But though through his own personal influence, many of different ranks whom he liked and respected, meeting in his house, learned to like and respect one another, still, even to-night, he could not remove the cloud which seemed to hang over all—a cloud so heavy, that none present liked referring to it. They hit upon all sorts of extraneous subjects, keeping far aloof from the one which evidently pressed upon all minds—the universal distress abroad, the fear that was knocking at almost every man's door but ours.

Of course, the talk fell on our neighbours—country-talk always does. I sat still, listening to Sir Herbert Oldtower, who was wondering that Lord Luxmore suffered the Hall to drop into disgraceful decay, and had begun cutting down the pine-woods round it.

“Woods, older than his title by many a century—downright sacrilege ! And the property being entailed, too—actual robbery of the heir ! But I understand anybody may do anything with Lord Ravenel—a mere selfish, cynical, idle voluptuary !”

“Indeed you are mistaken, Sir Herbert !” cried Mr. Jessop of Norton Bury—a very honest fellow was Josiah Jessop. “He banks with me—that is, there are some poor Catholics in this neighbourhood whom I pay—but bless me ! he told me not to tell. No, indeed. Cynical he may be ; idle, perhaps—most men of fashion are—but Lord Ravenel is not the least like his father—is he, Mr. Halifax ?”

“I have not seen Lord Ravenel for many years.”

And as if, even to this day, the mention of the young man’s name brought back thoughts of the last day we had seen him,—a day which, its sadness having gone by, still kept its unspoken sacredness, distinct from all other days,—John moved away and went and talked to a girl whom both he and the mother liked

above most young girls we knew — simple, sunny-faced Grace Oldtower.

Dancing began. Spite of my Quaker education, or perhaps for that very reason, I delighted to see dancing. Dancing, such as it was then, when young folk moved breezily and lightly, as if they loved it; skimming like swallows down the long lines of the Triumph—gracefully winding in and out through the graceful country-dance—lively always, but always decorous. In those days people did not think it necessary to the pleasures of dancing that any stranger should have liberty to snatch a shy, innocent girl round the waist, and whirl her about in mad waltz or awkward polka, till she stops, giddy and breathless, with burning cheeks and tossed hair, looking,—as I would not have liked to see our pretty Maud look.

No; though while watching the little lady to-night, I was inclined to say to her—

“ When you do dance, I wish you
A wave o’ the sea, that you might ever do
Nothing but that.”

And in her unwearied spirits she seemed as if she would readily have responded to the wish.

We did not see Guy among the dancers, who were now forming in a somewhat confused square, in order to execute a new dance called quadrilles, of which Miss Grace Oldtower was to be the instructress.

“Where is Guy?” said the mother, who would have missed him among a room full of people.

“Have you seen Guy anywhere, Miss Silver?”

Miss Silver, who sat playing tunes—she had declined dancing—turned, colouring visibly.

“Yes, I have seen him; he is in the study.”

“Would you be so kind as to fetch him?”

The governess rose and crossed the room, with a stately walk—statelier even than usual. Her silk gown, of some rich soft colour, fashioned after Mrs. Halifax’s taste, and the chaplet of bay-leaves, which Maud had insisted upon putting in her dark hair, made an astonishing change in Miss Silver. I could not help noticing it to Mrs. Halifax.

“Yes, indeed, she looks well. John says her features are fine; but, for my part, I don’t care for your statuesque faces; I like colour—expression. See that bright little Grace Oldtower!—a

thoroughly English rose ;—I like *her*. Poor Miss Silver ! I wish—”

What, out of compunction for a certain sharpness with which she had spoken, Mrs. Halifax was about to wish, remained undeclared. For, just this minute, Guy entered, and leaning his handsome head and his tender *petits soins* over the “English rose,” as his mother called her, led her out to the dancing.

We sat down and looked on.

“Guy dances lazily ; he is rather pale too, I fancy.”

“Tired, probably. He was out far too long on the ice to-day, with Maud and Miss Silver.—What a pretty creature his partner is !” added Ursula, thoughtfully.

“The children are growing up fast,” I said.

“Ay, indeed. To think that Guy is actually twenty-one—the age when his father was married !”

“Guy will be reminding you of that fact some day soon.”

Mrs. Halifax smiled. “The sooner the better, if only he makes a worthy choice—if only he brings me a daughter whom I can love.”

And I fancied there was love—motherly love—in the eyes that followed through the graceful mazes of her dancing the bonny English Rose.

Guy and his partner sat down beside us. His mother noticed that he had turned very pale again, and the lad owned to be in some pain: he had twisted his foot that morning, in helping Maud and Miss Silver across the ice; but it was a mere trifle—not worth mentioning.

A mere trifle! How strangely one often looks back afterwards upon “mere trifles.”

But now it passed over, with one or two anxious inquiries on the mother's part, and a soft, dewy shadow over the down-dropt cheek of the little Rose, who evidently did not like to miss dancing with her old play-fellow. Then Sir Herbert appeared to lead Mrs. Halifax in to supper, Guy limped along with pretty Grace on his arm, and all the guests, just enough to fill our longest table in John's study, came thronging round in a buzz of mirthfulness.

Either the warm, hospitable atmosphere, or

the sight of the merry youngsters, or the general influence of social pleasantness, had for the time being dispelled the cloud. But certainly it was dispelled. The master of the feast looked down two long lines of happy faces—his own as bright as theirs—down to where, at the foot of the table, the mother and mistress sat. She had been slightly nervous at times during the evening, but now she appeared thoroughly at ease and glad—glad to see her husband take his place at the head of his own hospitable board, in the midst of his own friends and his own people, honoured and beloved. It seemed a good omen—an omen that the bitter things outside would pass away.

How bitter they had been, and how sore the wife's heart still felt, I could see from the jealous way in which, smiling and cheerful as her demeanour was, she seemed to notice every look, every word of those around her, which might chance to bear reference to her husband; in her quick avoidance of every topic connected with these disastrous times, and, above all, in her hurried grasp of a newspaper that some careless servant brought in fresh from the night-mail, wet with sleet and snow.

“Do you get your county paper regularly?” asked some one at table. And then some others appeared to recollect the Norton Bury Mercury and its virulent attacks on their host—for there ensued an awkward pause, during which I saw Ursula’s face beginning to burn. But she conquered her wrath.

“There is often much interest in our provincial papers, Sir Herbert. My husband makes a point of taking them all in—bad and good—of every shade of politics. He believes it is only by hearing all sides that you can truly judge of the state of the country.”

“Just as a physician must hear all symptoms before he decides on the patient’s case. At least, so our good old friend Doctor Jessop used to say.”

“Eh?” said Mr. Jessop the banker, catching his own name, and waking up from a brown study, in which he had seemed to see nothing, except perhaps the newspaper, which in its printed cover lay between himself and Mrs. Halifax. “Eh? did any one—Oh, I beg pardon, beg pardon,—Sir Herbert,” hastily added.

the old man ; who was a very meek and worthy soul, and had been perhaps more subdued than usual this evening.

“I was referring,” said Sir Herbert, with his usual ponderous civility, “to your excellent brother, who was so much respected among us, for which respect allow me to say, he did not leave us without an inheritor.”

The old banker answered the formal bow with a kind of nervous hurry ; and then Sir Herbert, with a loud premise of his right as the oldest friend of our family, tried to obtain silence for the customary speech, prefatory to the customary toast of “Health and prosperity to the heir of Beechwood.”

There was great applause and filling of glasses ; great smiling and whispering ; everybody glancing at poor Guy ; who turned red and white, and evidently wished himself a hundred miles off. In the confusion I felt my sleeve touched, and saw leaning towards me, hidden by Maud’s laughing, happy face, the old banker. He held in his hand the

newspaper which seemed to have so fascinated him.

“It’s the London Gazette. Mr. Halifax gets it three hours before any of us. I may open it, eh? It is important to me. Mrs. Halifax would excuse, eh?”

Of course she would. Especially if she had seen the old man’s look, as his trembling fingers vainly tried to unfold the sheet without a single rustle’s betraying his surreptitious curiosity.

Sir Herbert rose, cleared his throat, and began.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I speak as a father myself, and as the son of a father whom—whom I will not refer to here, except to say that his good heart would have rejoiced to see this day. The high esteem in which Sir Ralph always held Mr. Halifax, has descended, and will descend—”

Here some one called out—

“Mr. Jessop! Look at Mr. Jessop!”

The old man had suddenly sank back, with a sort of choking groan. His eyes were staring blankly, his cheek was the colour of ashes.

But when he saw every one looking at him, he tried desperately to recover himself.

“’Tis nothing. Nothing of the slightest moment. Eh?” clutching tightly at the paper which Mrs. Halifax was kindly removing out of his hand. “There’s no news in it—none, I assure you.”

But from his agitation—from the pitiful effort he made to disguise it—it was plain enough that there was news. Plain, also, as in these dangerous and critical times men were only too quick to divine,—in what that news consisted. Tidings, which now made every newspaper a sight of fear,—especially this—the London Gazette.

Edwin caught and read the fatal page—the fatal column—known only too well.

“Father, it’s here. W——’s have stopped payment.”

W——’s was a great London house, the favourite banking-house in our county, with which many provincial banks, and Jessop’s especially, were widely connected, and would be no one knew how widely involved.

“W——’s stopped payment !”

A murmur—a hush of momentary suspense, as the Gazette was passed hurriedly from hand to hand ; and then our guests, one and all, sat looking at one another in breathless fear, suspicion, or assured dismay. For, as every one was aware, (we knew our neighbours’ affairs so well about innocent Enderley,) there was not a single household of that merry little company upon whom, near or remote, the blow would not fall—except ours.

No polite disguise could gloss over the general consternation. Few thought of Jessop—only of themselves. Many a father turned pale ; many a mother melted into smothered tears. More than one honest countenance that five minutes before had beamed like the rising sun, all friendliness and jocularly, I saw shrink into a wizened, worldly face, with greedy selfishness peering out of the corners of its eyes, eager to conceal its own alarms and dive as far as possible into the terrors of its neighbours.

“There will be a run on Jessop’s bank to-morrow,” I heard one person saying ; glancing

to where the poor old banker still sat, with a vacant, stupified smile, assuring all around him that "nothing had happened; really, nothing."

"A run? I suppose so. Then it will be '*Sauve qui peut*,' and the devil take the hindmost."

"What say you to all this, Mr. Halifax?"

John sat in his place; his eyes cast down; his right hand half-covering—as had grown into a habit with him—that sensitive, expressive mouth, which years had failed to harden into even necessary hypocrisy. He sat perfectly quiet, and had never spoken a syllable.

When Sir Herbert, who was the first to recover from the shock of these ill-tidings, called him by his name, Mr. Halifax looked quickly up. It was to see, instead of those two lines of happy faces, faces already gathering in troubled groups, faces angry, sullen, or miserable, all of which, with a vague distrust, seemed instinctively turned upon him.

"Mr. Halifax," said the baronet; and one could see how, in spite of his steadfast politeness, he too was not without his anxieties—

“ this is an unpleasant breaking-in upon your kindly hospitalities. I suppose, through this unpropitious event, each of us must make up our minds to some loss. Let me hope yours will be trifling.”

John made no answer.

“ Or, perhaps—though I can hardly hope anything so fortunate—perhaps this failure will not affect you at all?”

He waited—as did many others, for Mr. Halifax’s reply; which was long in coming. However, since all seemed to expect it, it did come at last; but grave and sad as if it were the announcement of some great misfortune.

“ No, Sir Herbert; it will not affect me at all.”

Sir Herbert, and not he alone—looked surprised—uneasily surprised. Some mutters there were of “ congratulation.” Then arose a troubled murmur of talking, in which the master of the house was forgotten; until the baronet said, “ My friends, I think we are forgetting our courtesy. Allow me to give you without more delay—the toast I was about to propose,—Health, long life, and happiness to Mr. Guy Halifax.”

And so poor Guy's birth-day toast was drunk ; almost in silence ; and the few words he said in acknowledgment were just listened to, scarcely heard. Every one rose from table, and the festivities were over.

One by one all our guests began to make excuse. One by one, involuntarily perhaps, yet not the less painfully and plainly, they all shrunk away from us, as if in the universal trouble we, who had nothing to fear, had no part nor lot. Formal congratulations, given with pale lips and wandering eyes : brusque adieux, as some of the more honest or less courteous showed but too obviously how cruelly, even resentfully, they felt the inequalities of fortune ; hasty departures, full of a dismay that rejected angrily every shadow of consolation ;—all these things John had to meet and to bear.

He met them with composure ; scarcely speaking a word, as indeed what was there to say ? To all the friendly speeches, real or pretended, he listened with a kind of sad gravity : of all harsher words than these—and there were not a few—he took not the least notice,

but held his place as master of the house ; generously deaf and blind to everything that it were as well the master of the house should neither hear nor see.

At last he was left, a very Pariah of prosperity, by his own hearth, quite alone.

The last carriage had rolled away ; the tired household had gone to bed ; there was no one in the study but me. John came in and stood leaning with both his arms against the fire-place, motionless and silent. He leant there so long, that at last I touched him.

“ Well, Phineas ! ”

I saw this night's events had wounded him to the heart's core.

“ Are you thinking of these honest, friendly, disinterested guests of ours. Don't ! They are not worth a single thought.”

“ Not an angry thought, certainly.” And he smiled at my wrath—a sad smile.

“ Ah, Phineas ! now I begin to understand what is meant by the curse of prosperity.”

CHAPTER III.

A GREAT, eager, but doggedly-quiet crowd, of which each had his or her—for it was half women—individual terror to hide, his or her own individual interest to fight for, and cared not a straw for that of any one else.

It was market-day, and this crowd was collected and collecting every minute, before the bank at Norton Bury. It included all classes, from the stout farmer's wife, or market-woman, to the pale, frightened lady of "limited income," who had never been in such a throng before; from the aproned mechanic to the gentleman who sat in his carriage at the street corner, confident that whatever poor chance there was, his would be the best.

Everybody was, as I have said, extremely quiet. You heard none of the jokes that always

rise in and circulate through a crowd ; none of the loud outcries of a mob. All were intent on themselves and their own business ; on that fast-bolted red-baize door, and on the green blind of the windows, which informed them that it was “ open from ten till four.”

The Abbey clock struck three-quarters. Then there was a slight stirring, a rustling here and there of paper, as some one drew out and examined his bank-notes ; openly, with small fear of theft—they were not worth stealing.

John and I, a little way off, stood looking on, where we had once watched a far different crowd ; for Mr. Jessop owned the doctor's former house, and in sight of the green Bank blinds were my dear old father's known windows.

Guy's birthday had fallen on a Saturday. This was Monday morning. We had driven over to Norton Bury, John and I, at an unusually early hour. He did not exactly tell me why, but it was not difficult to guess. Not difficult to perceive how strongly he was interested, even affected,—as any man, knowing all the

circumstances, could not but be affected,—by the sight of that crowd, all the sadder for its being such a patient, decent, respectable crowd, out of which so large a proportion was women.

I noticed this latter fact to John.

“ Yes, I was sure it would be so. Jessop’s bank has such a number of small depositors and issues so many small notes. He cannot cash above half of them without some notice. If there comes a run, he may have to stop payment this very day; and then, how wide the misery would spread among the poor, God knows.”

His eye wandered pitifully over the heaving mass of anxious faces, blue with cold, and growing more and more despondent, as every minute they turned with a common impulse from the closed bank door to the Abbey clock, glittering far up in the blue, sunshiny atmosphere of morning.

Its finger touched the one heel of the great striding 10—glided on to the other—the ten strokes fell leisurely and regularly upon the clear, frosty air; then the chimes—Norton

Bury was proud of its Abbey chimes—burst out in the tune of “Life let us Cherish.”

The bells went through all the tune, to the very last note—then ensued silence. The crowd were silent too—almost breathless with intent listening—but alas ! not to the merry Abbey chimes.

The bank door remained closed—not a rattle at the bolts, not a clerk’s face peering out above the blind. The house was as shut-up and desolate as if it were entirely empty.

Five whole minutes—by the Abbey clock—did that poor, patient crowd wait on the pavement. Then a murmur arose. One or two men hammered at the door ; some frightened women, jostled in the press, began to scream.

John could bear it no longer. “Come along with me,” he said, hurriedly. “I must see Jessop—we can get in at the garden door.”

This was a little gate round the corner of the street, well known to us both in those brief “court-ing days,” when we came to tea of evenings, and found Mrs. Jessop and Ursula March in the garden watering the flowers and tying up the roses. Nay, we passed out of it into the same

summer parlour, where—I cannot tell if John ever knew of the incident, at all events he never mentioned it to me—there had been transacted a certain momentous event in Ursula's life and mine. Entering by the French window, there rose up to my mental vision, in vivid contrast to all present scenes, the picture of a young girl I had once seen sitting there, with head drooped, knitting. Could that day be twenty-five years ago?

No summer parlour now—its atmosphere was totally changed. It was a dull, dusty room, of which the only lively object was a large fire, the under half of which had burnt itself away unstirred into black dingy caverns. Before it, with breakfast untasted, sat Josiah Jessop—his feet on the fender, his elbows on his knees, the picture of despair.

“Mr. Jessop, my good friend!”

“No, I haven't a friend in the world, or shall not have, an hour hence. Oh! it's you, Mr. Halifax?—You have not an account to close? You don't hold any notes of mine, do you?”

John put his hand on the old man's shoulder, and repeated that he only came as a friend.

“Not the first ‘friend’ I have received this morning. I knew I should be early honoured with visitors;” and the banker attempted a dreary smile. “Sir Herbert and half-a-dozen more are waiting for me up-stairs. The biggest fish must have the first bite—eh, you know?”

“I know,” said John, gloomily.

“Hark! those people outside will hammer my door down!—Speak to them, Mr. Halifax—tell them I’m an old man—that I was always an honest man—always. If only they would give me time—hark! just hark! Heaven bless me! do they want to tear me in pieces?”

John went out for a few moments, then came back and sat down beside Mr. Jessop.

“Compose yourself” — the old man was shaking like an aspen leaf. “Tell me, if you have no objection to give me this confidence, exactly how your affairs stand.”

With a gasp of helpless thankfulness, looking up in John’s face, while his own quivered like a frightened child’s,—the banker obeyed. It seemed that great as was his loss by W——’s failure, it was not absolute ruin to him. In effect, he was

at this moment perfectly solvent, and by calling in mortgages, &c., could meet both the accounts of the gentry who banked with him, together with all his own notes now afloat in the county, principally among the humbler ranks, petty trades-people, and such like,—if only both classes of customers would give him time to pay them.

“But they will not. There will be a run upon the bank—and then all’s over with me. It’s a hard case—solvent as I am—ready and able to pay every farthing—if only I had a week’s time. As it is I must stop payment to-day. Hark! they are at the door again! Mr. Halifax, for God’s sake quiet them!”

“I will; only tell me first what sum, added to the cash you have available, would keep the bank open—just for a day or two.”

At once guided and calmed, the old man’s business faculties seemed to return. He began to calculate, and soon stated the sum he needed: I think it was three or four thousand pounds.

“Very well; I have thought of a plan. But first—those poor fellows outside.—Thank Heaven, I am a rich man, and everybody knows it. Phineas, that inkstand, please.”

He sat down and wrote: curiously the attitude and manner reminded me of his sitting down and writing at my father's table, after the bread riot—years and years ago. Soon, a notice, signed by Josiah Jessop, and afterwards by himself, to the effect that the bank would open, “without fail,” at one o'clock this day,—was given by him to the astonished clerk, to be posted in the window.

A responsive cheer outside showed how readily those outside had caught at even this gleam of hope. Also—how implicitly they trusted in the mere name of a gentleman who all over the county was known for “his word being as good as his bond,”—John Halifax.

The banker breathed freer; but his respite was short: an imperative message came from the gentlemen above stairs, desiring his presence. With a kind of blind dependence, he looked towards John.

“Let me go in your stead. You can trust me to manage matters to the best of my power?”

The banker overwhelmed him with gratitude.

“Nay, that ought to be my word, standing in

this house, and remembering"—His eyes turned to the two portraits—grimly-coloured daubs, yet with a certain apology of likeness too, which broadly smiled at one another from opposite walls—the only memorials now remaining of the good doctor and his cheery little old wife. "Come, Mr. Jessop, leave the matter with me; believe me, it is not only a pleasure, but a duty."

The old man melted into senile tears.

I do not know how John managed the provincial magnates, who were sitting in council considering how best to save, first themselves, then the bank, lastly—If the poor public outside had been made acquainted with that ominous "lastly!" Or if to the respectable conclave above stairs, who would have recoiled indignantly at the vulgar word "jobbing," had been hinted a phrase—which ran oddly in and out of the nooks of my brain, keeping time to the murmur in the street, "*Vox populi, vox Dei*"—truly, I should have got little credit for my Latinity.

John came out in about half an hour, with a cheerful countenance; told me he was going

over to Coltham for an hour or two—would I wait his return ?

“ And all is settled ? ” I asked.

“ Will be soon, I trust. I can’t stay to tell you more now. Good bye.”

I was no man of business, and could assist in nothing. So I thought the best I could do was to pass the time in wandering up and down the familiar garden, idly watching the hoar-frost on the arbutus leaves, and on the dry stems of what had been dear little Mrs. Jessop’s favourite roses—the same roses I had seen her among on that momentous evening—the evening when Ursula’s bent neck flushed more crimson than the sunset itself, as I told her John Halifax was “ too noble to die for any woman’s love.”

No—he had lived for it—earned it—won it. And musing over these long-ago times, my heart melted—foolish old heart that it was ! with a trembling joy, to think that Providence had, in some way, used my poor useless hand to give to him this blessing, a man’s chiefest blessing of a virtuous and loving wife—which had crowned his life for all these wonderful years.

As it neared one o'clock, I could see my ancient friend the Abbey clock with not a wrinkle in his old face, staring at me through the bare Abbey trees. I began to feel rather anxious. I went into the deserted office; and thence, none forbidding, ensconced myself behind the sheltering Bank blinds.

The crowd had scarcely moved; a very honest, patient, weary crowd, dense in the centre, thinning towards the edges. On its extremest verge, waiting in a curricie, was a gentleman, who seemed observing it with a lazy curiosity. I, having like himself apparently nothing better to do, observed this gentleman.

He was dressed in the height of the mode, combined with a novel and eccentric fashion, which had been lately set by that extraordinary young nobleman whom everybody talked about—my Lord Byron. His neckcloth was loose, his throat bare, and his hair fell long and untidy. His face, that of a man about thirty—I fancied I had seen it before, but could not recall where—was delicate, thin, with an expression at once cynical and melancholy. He sat in his carriage,

wrapped in furs, or looked carelessly out on the scene before him, as if he had no interest therein—as if there was nothing in life worth living for.

“Poor fellow!” said I to myself, recalling the bright, busy, laughing faces of our growing-up lads, recalling especially their father’s—full of all that active energy and wise cheerfulness which gives zest to existence—God forbid any man should die till he has lived to learn it! “Poor fellow! I wish his Moodiness could take a lesson from us at home!”

But the gentleman soon retired from my observation under his furs; for the sky had gloomed over, and snow began to fall. Those on the pavement shook it drearily off, and kept turning every minute to the Abbey clock—I feared it would take the patience of Job to enable them to hold out another quarter of an hour.

At length some determined hand again battered at the door. I fancied I heard a clerk speaking out of the first-floor window.

“Gentlemen,”—how tremblingly polite the voice was!—“Gentlemen, in five minutes—positively five minutes—the Bank will—”

The rest of the speech was drowned and lost. Dashing round the street corner, the horses all in a foam,—came our Beechwood carriage. Mr. Halifax leaped out.

Well might the crowd divide for him—well might they cheer him. For he carried a canvas bag—a great, ugly, grimy-coloured bag—a precious, precious bag, with the consolation—perhaps the life of hundreds, in it!

I knew, almost by intuition, what he had done—what in one or two instances was afterwards done by other rich and generous Englishmen, during the crisis of this year.

The Bank door flew open like magic. The crowd came pushing in; but when John called out to them, “Good people, pray let me pass!” they yielded and suffered him to go in first. He went right up to the desk, behind which, flanked by a tolerable array of similar canvas bags, full of gold—but nevertheless waiting in mortal fear, and as white as his own neck-cloth,—the old banker stood.

“Mr. Jessop,” John said, in a loud distinct voice, that all might hear, “I have the pleasure

to open an account with you. I feel satisfied that in these dangerous times no credit is more safe than yours. Allow me to pay in to-day the sum of five thousand pounds."

"Five thousand pounds!"

The rumour of it was repeated from mouth to mouth. Such a sum seemed unlimited. It gave universal confidence. Many who had been scrambling, swearing, almost fighting, to reach the counter and receive gold for their notes, put them again into their pockets, uncashed. Others, chiefly women, got them cashed with a trembling hand, nay, with tears of joy. A few who had come to close accounts, changed their minds, and even paid money in. All were satisfied—the run upon the bank ceased.

Mr. Halifax stood aside, looking on. After the first murmur of surprise and pleasure, no one seemed to take any notice of him, or of what he had done. Only one old widow woman, as she slipped three bright guineas under the lid of her market-basket, dropped him a curtsy in passing by.

"It's your doing, Mr. Halifax. The Lord reward you, sir."

"Thank you," he said, and shook her by the hand. I thought to myself, watching the many that came and went, unmindful, "*only this Samaritan!*"

No—one person more standing by addressed him by name. "This is indeed your doing, and an act of benevolence which I believe no man alive would have done, except Mr. Halifax."

And the gentleman who spoke—the same I had seen outside in his curricie—held out a friendly hand.

"I see you do not remember me. My name is Ravenel."

"Lord Ravenel!"

John uttered this exclamation—and no more. I saw that this sudden meeting had brought back, with a cruel tide of memory, the last time they met—by the small nursery bed, in that upper chamber at Enderley.

However, this feeling shortly passed away, as must needs be; and we all three began to converse together.

While he talked, something of the old "Anselmo" came back into Lord Ravenel's face:

especially when John asked him if he would drive over with us to Enderley.

“Enderley—how strange the word sounds!—yet I should like to see the place again. Poor old Enderley!”

Irresolutely—all his gestures seemed dreamy and irresolute—he drew his hand across his eyes—the same white, long-fingered, womanish hand which had used to guide Muriel’s over the organ keys.

“Yes—I think I will go back with you to Enderley. But first I must speak to Mr. Jessop here.”

It was about some poor Catholic families, who, as we had before learnt, had long been his pensioners.

“You are a Catholic still then?” I asked.
“We heard the contrary.”

“Did you?—Oh, of course. Probably you heard also—that I have been to the Holy Land, and turned Jew—called at Constantinople, and come back a Mahommedan.”

“But are you of your old faith?” John said.
“Still a sincere Catholic?”

“If you take Catholic in its original sense, certainly. I am a universal believer. I credit everything—and nothing. Let us change the subject.” The contemptuous scepticism of his manner altered, as he enquired after Mrs. Halifax and the children. “No longer children now, I suppose?”

“Scarcely. Guy and Walter are as tall as yourself; and my daughter—”

“Your daughter?”—with a start—“oh yes, I recollect. Baby Maud. Is she at all like—like—”

“No.”

Neither said more than this; but it seemed as if their hearts warmed to one another, knitted by the same tender remembrance.

We drove home. Lord Ravenel muffled himself up in his furs, complaining bitterly of the snow and sleet.

“Yes, the winter is setting in sharply,” John replied, as he reined in his horses at the turnpike gate. “This will be a hard Christmas for many.”

“Ay, indeed, sir,” said the gate-keeper, touching his hat. “And if I might make so bold—

it's a dark night, and the road's lonely—" he added, in a mysterious whisper.

"Thank you, my friend. I am aware of all that." But as John drove on, he remained for some time very silent.

On, across the bleak country, with the snow pelting in our faces—along roads so deserted, that our carriage-wheels made the only sound audible, and that might have been heard distinctly for miles.

All of a sudden, the horses were pulled up. Three or four ill-looking figures had started out of a ditch-bank, and caught hold of the reins.

"Holloa there!—What do you want?"

"Money."

"Let go my horses! They're spirited beasts. You'll get trampled on."

"Who cares?"

This brief colloquy passed in less than a minute. It shewed at once our position—miles away from any house—on this desolate moor; shewed plainly our danger—John's danger.

He himself did not seem to recognise it. He stood upright on the box seat, the whip in his hand.

“Get away, you fellows, or I must drive over you !”

“Thee’d better !” With a yell, one of the men leaped up and clung to the neck of the plunging mare—then was dashed to the ground between her feet. The poor wretch uttered one groan and no more. John sprang out of his carriage, caught the mare’s head, and backed her.

“Hold off !—the poor fellow is killed, or may be in a minute. Hold off, I say.”

If ever these men, planning perhaps their first ill deed, were struck dumb with astonishment, it was to see the gentleman they were intending to rob take up their comrade in his arms, drag him towards the carriage lamps, rub snow on his face, and chafe his heavy hands. But all in vain. The blood trickled down from a wound in the temples—the head, with its open mouth dropping, fell back upon John’s knee.

“He is quite dead.”

The others gathered round in silence, watching Mr. Halifax, as he still knelt, with the dead man’s head leaning against him, mournfully regarding it.

“I think I know him. Where does his wife live?”

Some one pointed across the moor, to a light, faint as a glowworm. “Take that rug out of my carriage—wrap him in it.” The order was at once obeyed. “Now carry him home. I will follow presently.”

“Surely not,” expostulated Lord Ravenel, who had got out of the carriage and stood, shivering and much shocked, beside Mr. Halifax. “You would not surely put yourself in the power of these scoundrels? What brutes they are—the lower orders.”

“Not altogether—when you know them. Phineas, will you drive Lord Ravenel on to Beechwood?”

“Excuse me—certainly not,” said Lord Ravenel with dignity. “We will stay to see the result of the affair. What a singular man Mr. Halifax is, and always was,” he added, thoughtfully, as he muffled himself up again in his furs, and relapsed into silence.

Soon, following the track of those black figures across the snow, we came to a cluster of

peat huts, alongside of the moorland road. John took one of the carriage-lamps in his hand, and went in, without saying a word. To my surprise Lord Ravenel presently dismounted and followed him. I was left with the reins in my hand, and two or three of those ill-visaged men hovering about the carriage; but no one attempted to do me any harm. Nay, when John reappeared, after a lapse of some minutes, one of them civilly picked up the whip and put it into his hand.

“Thank you. Now, my men, tell me what did you want with me just now?”

“Money,” cried one. “Work,” shouted another.

“And a likely way you went about to get it! Stopping me in the dark, on a lonely road, just like common robbers. I did not think any Enderley men would have done a thing so cowardly.”

“We bean’t cowards,” was the surly answer. “Thee carries pistols, Mr. Halifax.”

“You forced me to do it. My life is as precious to my wife and children, as—as that poor fellow’s.”—John stopped. “God help us, my

men ! it's a hard world for us all sometimes. Why did you not know me better ? Why not come to my house and ask honestly for a dinner and a half-crown ?—you should have had both, any day."

"Thank'ee, sir," was the general cry. "And, sir," begged one old man, "you'll hush up the 'crowner's 'quest—you and this gentleman here. You won't put us in jail, for taking to the road, Mr. Halifax ?"

"No ;—unless you attack me again. But I am not afraid—I'll trust you. Look here !" He took the pistol out of his breast pocket, cocked it, and fired its two barrels harmlessly into the air. "Now, good night ; and if ever I carry fire-arms again, it will be your fault, not mine."

So saying, he held the carriage-door open for Lord Ravenel, who took his place with a subdued and thoughtful air : then mounting the box-seat, John drove, in somewhat melancholy silence, across the snowy, starlit moors to Beechwood.

CHAPTER IV.

IN the home light.

It was a scene—glowing almost as those evening pictures at Longfield. Those pictures, photographed on memory by the summer sun of our lives, and which no paler after-sun could have power to re-produce. Nothing earthly is ever re-produced in the same form. I suppose Heaven meant it to be so; that in the perpetual progression of our existence, we should be reconciled to loss, and taught that change itself is but another form for aspiration. Aspiration, which never can rest, or ought to rest, in anything short of the One absolute Perfection—the One all-satisfying Good, “*in whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*”

I say this, to excuse myself for thoughts, which at times made me grave—even in the

happy home-light of John's study ; where, for several weeks after the last incident I have recorded, the family were in the habit of gathering every evening. For poor Guy was a captive. The "mere trifle" had turned out to be a sprained foot, which happening a tall and strong young man became serious. He bore his imprisonment restlessly enough at first, but afterwards grew more reconciled—took to reading, drawing, and society—and even began to interest himself in the pursuits of his sister Maud, who every morning had her lessons in the study.

Miss Silver first proposed this. She had evinced more feeling than was usual to her, since Guy's accident ; showed him many little feminine kindnesses — out of compunction, it seemed ; and altogether was much improved. Of evenings, as now, she always made one of the "young people," who were generally grouped together round Guy's sofa — Edwin, Walter, and little Maud. The father and mother sat opposite—as usual, side by side, he with his newspaper, she with her work. Or sometimes, falling into pleasant idleness, they would slip

hand in hand, and sit talking to one another in an under-tone, or silently and smilingly watching the humours of their children.

For me, I generally took to my nook in the chimney-corner—it was a very ancient fire-place, with settles on each side, and dogs instead of a grate, upon which many a faggot hissed and crackled its merry brief life away. Nothing could be more cheery and comfortable than this old-fashioned, low-roofed room, three sides of which were peopled with books—all the books which John had gathered up during the course of his life. Perhaps it was their long-familiar, friendly faces which made this his favourite room out of the whole house, his own especial domain. But then he did not keep it tabooed from his family; he liked to have them about him, even in his studious hours.

So, of evenings, we all sat together as now, each busy, and none interrupting the rest. At intervals, flashes of talk or laughter broke out, chiefly from Guy, Walter, or Maud, when Edwin would look up from his everlasting book, and even the grave governess relax into a smile;

and since she had learnt to smile, it became more and more apparent how very handsome Miss Silver was. "Handsome" is, I think, the fittest word for her; that correctness of form and colour, which attracts the eye alone, and perhaps the eye of men rather than of women;—at least, Mrs. Halifax could never be brought to see it. But then her peculiar taste was for slender, small brunettes, like Grace Oldtower; whereas Miss Silver was large and fair.

Fair, in every sense, most decidedly. And now that she evidently began to pay a little more attention to her dress and her looks, we found out that she was also young.

"Only twenty-one to-day, Guy says," I remarked one day to Ursula.

"How did Guy know it?"

"I believe he discovered the wonderful secret from Maud."

"Maud and her brother Guy have grown wonderful friends since his illness. Do you not think so?"

"Yes, I found the two of them—and even Miss Silver—as merry as possible, when I came into the study this morning."

“Did you?” said the mother, with an involuntary glance at the group opposite.

There was nothing to observe. They all sat in most harmless quietude, Edwin reading, Maud at his feet, playing with the cat, Miss Silver busy at a piece of that delicate muslin-work with which young women used then to ornament their gowns. Guy had been drawing a pattern for it, and now leant back upon his sofa, shading off the fire with his hand, and from behind it gazing, as I had often seen him gaze lately, with a curious intentness,—at the young governess.

“Guy,” said his mother, (and Guy started), “what were you thinking about?”

“Oh, nothing ; that is—” here, by some accident, Miss Silver quitted the room. “Mother, come over here, I want your opinion. There, sit down—though it’s nothing of the least importance.”

Nevertheless, it was with some hesitation that he brought out the mighty question, namely, that it was Miss Silver’s birth-day to-day ; that he thought we ought to remember it, and give her some trifle, as a present.

“And I was considering, this large ‘Flora’ I ordered from London,—she would like it extremely : she is so fond of botany.”

“What do you know about botany?” said Edwin, sharply and rather irrelevantly as it seemed, till I remembered how he plumed himself upon his knowledge of this science, and how he had persisted in taking Maud, and her governess also, long wintry walks across the country, “in order to study the cryptogamia.”

Guy vouchsafed no answer to his brother ; he was too much absorbed in turning over the pages of the beautiful Flora on his knee.

“What do you say, all of you? Father, don’t you think she would like it? Then, suppose you give it to her?”

At this inopportune moment Miss Silver returned.

She might have been aware that she was under discussion—at least so much of discussion as was implied by Guy’s eager words and his mother’s silence, for she looked around her uneasily, and was about to retire.

“Do not go,” Guy exclaimed, anxiously.

“Pray do not,” his mother added; “we were just talking about you, Miss Silver. My son hopes you will accept this book from him, and from us all, with all kind birth-day wishes.”

And rising, with a little more gravity than was her wont, Mrs. Halifax touched the girl's forehead with her lips, and gave her the present.

Miss Silver coloured, and drew back. “You are very good, but indeed I would much rather not have it.”

“Why so? Do you dislike gifts, or this gift in particular?”

“Oh, no; certainly not.”

“Then,” said John, as he too came forward and shook hands with her with an air of hearty kindness, “do take the book. Do let us show how much we respect you; how entirely we regard you as one of the family.”

Guy turned a look of grateful pleasure to his father; but Miss Silver, colouring more than ever, still held back.

“No, I cannot;—indeed I cannot.”

“Why can you not?”

“For several reasons.”

"Give me only one of them—as much as can be expected from a young lady," said Mr. Halifax, good-humouredly.

"Mr. Guy ordered the Flora for himself. I must not allow him to give up his pleasure for me."

"It would not be giving it up if *you* had it," returned the lad, in a low tone, at which once more his younger brother looked up, angrily.

"What folly about nothing! how can one read with such a clatter going on?"

"You old book-worm! you care for nothing and nobody but yourself," Guy answered, laughing. But Edwin, really incensed, rose and settled himself in the far corner of the room.

"Edwin is right," said the father, in a tone which indicated his determination to end the discussion, a tone which even Miss Silver obeyed. "My dear young lady, I hope you will like your book; Guy, write her name in it at once."

Guy willingly obeyed, but was a good while over the task; his mother came and looked over his shoulder.

"Louisa Eugenie—how did you know that,

Guy? Louisa Eugenie Sil——is that your name, my dear?"

The question, simple as it was, seemed to throw the governess into much confusion, even agitation. At last, she drew herself up with the old repulsive gesture, which of late had been slowly wearing off.

"No—I will not deceive you any longer. My right name is Louise Eugenie D'Argent."

Mrs. Halifax started. "Are you a Frenchwoman?"

"On my father's side—yes."

"Why did you not tell me so?"

"Because if you remember, at our first interview, you said no Frenchwoman should educate your daughter. And I was homeless—friendless."

"Better starve than tell a falsehood," cried the mother, indignantly.

"I told no falsehood. You never asked me of my parentage."

"Nay," said John, interfering, "you must not speak in that manner to Mrs. Halifax. Why did you renounce your father's name?"

“Because English people would have scouted my father’s daughter. You knew him—everybody knew him—he was D’Argent the Jacobin—D’Argent the Bonnet Rouge.”

She threw out these words defiantly, and quitted the room.

“This is a dreadful discovery. Edwin, you have seen most of her—did you ever imagine——”

“I knew it, mother,” said Edwin, without lifting his eyes from his book; those keen eyes, noted for their penetration into everything and everybody. “After all, French or English,—it makes no difference.”

“I should think not indeed,” cried Guy, angrily. “Whatever her father is, if any one dared to think the worse of her——”

“Hush!—till another time,” said the father, with a glance at Maud, who with wide open eyes in which the tears were just springing, had been listening to all these revelations about her governess.

But Maud’s tears were soon stopped, as well as this painful conversation, by the entrance of our daily, or rather nightly, visitor for these

six weeks past, Lord Ravenel. His presence, always welcome, was a great relief now. We never discussed family affairs before people. The boys began to talk to Lord Ravenel: and Maud took her privileged place on a footstool beside him. From the first sight she had been his favourite,—he said, because of her resemblance to Muriel. But I think, more than any fancied likeness to that sweet lost face, which he never spoke of without tenderness inexpressible—there was something in Maud's buoyant youth, just between childhood and girlhood, having the charms of one and the immunities of the other, which was especially attractive to this man, who, at three-and-thirty, found life a weariness and a burthen—at least, he said so.

Life was never either weary or burthensome in our house—not even to-night, though our friend found us less lively than usual—though John maintained more than his usual silence, and Mrs. Halifax fell into troubled reveries. Guy and Edwin, both considerably excited, argued and contradicted one another more warmly than even the Beechwood liberty of

speech allowed. For Miss Silver, she did not appear again.

Lord Ravenel seemed to take these slight *désagrémens* very calmly. He stayed his customary time, smiling languidly as ever at the boys' controversies, or listening with a half-pleased, half-melancholy laziness to Maud's gay prattle, his eye following her about the room with the privileged tenderness that twenty years' seniority allows a man to feel and show towards a child. At his wonted hour he rode away, sighingly contrasting pleasant Beechwood with dreary and solitary Luxmore.

After his departure, we did not again close round the fire. Maud vanished; the younger boys also; Guy settled himself on his sofa, having first taken the pains to limp across the room and fetch the Flora, which Edwin had carefully stowed away in the book-case. Then making himself comfortable, as the pleasure-loving lad liked well enough to do, he lay dreamily gazing at the title-page, where was written her name, and "From Guy Halifax, with—"

“What were you going to add, my son?”

He, glancing up at his mother, made her no answer, and hastily closed the book.

She looked hurt; but saying nothing more, began moving about the room, putting things in order before retiring. John sat in his arm-chair—meditative. She asked him what he was thinking about?

“About that man, Jacques D’Argent.”

“You have heard of him, then?”

“Few had not, twenty years ago. He was one of the most ‘blatant beasts’ of the Reign of Terror. A fellow without honesty, conscience, or even common decency.”

“And that man’s daughter we have had in our house, teaching our innocent child!”

Alarm and disgust were written on every feature of the mother’s face. It was scarcely surprising. Now that the ferment which had convulsed society in our younger days was settling down,—though still we were far from that ultimate calm which enables posterity to judge fully and fairly such a remarkable historical crisis as the French Revolution—most English people

looked back with horror on the extreme opinions of that time. If Mrs. Halifax had a weak point, it was her prejudice against anything French or Jacobinical. Partly, from that tendency to moral conservatism which in most persons, especially women, strengthens as old age advances ; partly I believe, from the terrible warning given by the fate of one—of whom for years we had never heard—whose very name was either unknown to, or forgotten by, our children.

“ John, can’t you speak ? Don’t you see the frightful danger ? ”

“ Love, try and be calmer.”

“ How can I ? Remember—remember Caroline.”

“ Nay, we are not talking of her, but of a girl whom we know, and have had good opportunity of knowing. A girl, who, whatever may have been her antecedents, has lived for six months blamelessly in our house.”

“ Would to Heaven she had never entered it ! But it is not too late. She may leave—she shall leave, immediately.”

“ Mother ! ” burst out Guy. Never since

she bore him had his mother heard her name uttered in such a tone.

She stood petrified.

"Mother, you are unjust, heartless, cruel. She shall *not* leave; she shall *not*, I say!"

"Guy, how dare you speak to your mother in that way?"

"Yes, father, I dare. I'll dare anything, rather than—"

"Stop. Mind what you are saying—or you may repent it."

And Mr. Halifax, speaking in that low tone to which his voice always fell in serious displeasure, laid a heavy hand on the lad's shoulder. Father and son exchanged fiery glances. The mother, terrified, rushed between them.

"Don't, John! Don't be angry with him. He could not help it,—my poor boy!"

At her piteous look, Guy and his father both drew back. John put his arm round his wife, and made her sit down. She was trembling exceedingly.

"You see, Guy, how wrong you have been. How could you wound your mother so?"

"I did not mean to wound her," the lad answered. "I only wished to prevent her from being unjust and unkind to one unto whom she must show all justice and all kindness. One whom I respect, esteem—whom I *love*."

"Love!"

"Yes, mother! Yes, father! I love her. I intend to marry her."

Guy said this with an air of quiet determination, very different from the usual impetuosity of his character. It was easy to perceive that a great change had come over him; that in this passion, the silent growth of which no one had suspected, he was most thoroughly in earnest. From the boy he had suddenly started up into the man; and his parents saw it.

They looked at him, and then mournfully at one another. The father was the first to speak.

"All this is very sudden. You should have told us of it before."

"I did not know it myself till—till very lately," the youth answered more softly, lowering his head and blushing.

"Is Miss Silver—is the lady aware of it?"

“No.”

“That is well,” said the father, after a pause. “In this silence you have acted as an honourable lover should, towards her; as a dutiful son should act, towards his parents.”

Guy looked pleased. He stole his hand nearer his mother’s, but she neither took it nor repelled it; she seemed quite stunned.

At this point I noticed that Maud had crept into the room;—I sent her out again as quickly as I could. Alas! this was the first secret that needed to be kept from her; the first painful mystery in our happy, happy home!

In any such home the first “falling in love,” whether of son or daughter, necessarily makes a great change. Greater if the former than the latter. There is often a pitiful truth—I know not why it should be so, but so it is—in the foolish rhyme, which the mother had laughingly said over to me this very morning!—

“My son’s my son till he gets him a wife,
But my daughter’s my daughter all her life.”

And when, as in this case, the son wishes to

marry one whom his father may not wholly approve, whom his mother does not heartily love, surely the pain is deepened tenfold.

Those who in the dazzled vision of youth see only the beauty and splendour of love—first love, who deem it comprises the whole of life, beginning, aim, and end,—may marvel that I, who have been young, and now am old, see as I saw that night, not only the lover's, but the parents' side of the question. I felt overwhelmed with sadness, as, viewing the three, I counted up in all its bearings and consequences, near and remote, this attachment of poor Guy's.

"Well, father," he said at last, guessing by intuition that the father's heart would best understand his own.

"Well, my son," John answered, sadly.

"*You* were young once."

"So I was :—" with a tender glance upon the lad's heated and excited countenance. "Do not suppose I cannot feel with you. Still, I wish you had been less precipitate."

"You were little older than I am when you married?"

“But my marriage was rather different from this projected one of yours. I knew your mother well, and she knew me. Both of us had been tried—by trouble which we shared together, by absence, by many and various cares. We chose one another, not hastily or blindly, but with free will and open eyes. No, Guy,” he added, speaking earnestly and softly, “mine was no sudden fancy, no frantic passion. I honoured your mother above all women. I loved her as my own soul.”

“So do I love Louise. I would die for her any day.”

At the son's impetuosity the father smiled; not incredulously, only sadly.

All this while the mother had sat motionless, never uttering a sound. Suddenly, hearing a footstep and a light knock at the door, she darted forward and locked it, crying, in a voice that one could hardly have recognized as hers—

“No admittance! Go away.”

A note was pushed in under the door. Mrs. Halifax picked it up;—opened it, read it mechanically, and sat down again; taking no

notice even when Guy, catching sight of the hand-writing, eagerly seized the paper.

It was merely a line, stating Miss Silver's wish to leave Beechwood immediately ; signed with her full name—her right name—" Louise Eugenie D'Argent."

A postscript added: " Your silence I shall take as permission to depart ; and shall be gone early to-morrow."

" To-morrow ! Gone to-morrow ! And she does not even know that—that I love her. Mother, you have ruined my happiness. I will never forgive you—never !"

Never forgive his mother ! His mother, who had borne him, nursed him, reared him ; who had loved him with that love—like none other in the world—the love of a woman for her first-born son, all these twenty-one years !

It was hard. I think the most passionate lover, in reasonable moments, would allow that it was hard. No marvel that even her husband's clasp could not remove the look of heart-broken, speechless suffering which settled stonily down in Ursula's face, as she watched her boy—

storming about, furious with uncontrollable passion and pain.

At last, mother-like, she forgot the passion in pity of the pain.

"He is not strong yet; he will do himself harm. Let me go to him! John, let me!" Her husband released her.

Faintly, with a weak, uncertain walk, she went up to Guy and touched his arm.

"You must keep quiet, or you will be ill. I cannot have my son ill—not for any girl. Come, sit down—here, beside your mother."

She was obeyed. Looking into her eyes, and seeing no anger there, nothing but grief and love, the young man's right spirit came into him again.

"O, mother, mother, forgive me! I am so miserable—so miserable."

He laid his head on her shoulder. She kissed and clasped him close—her boy who never could be wholly hers again, who had learned to love some one else dearer than his mother.

After a while she said, "Father, shake hands

with Guy. Tell him, that we forgive his being angry with us ; that perhaps, some day—”

She stopped, uncertain as to the father's mind, or seeking strength for her own.

“Some day,” John continued, “Guy will find out that we can have nothing in the world—except our children's good—so dear to us as their happiness.”

Guy looked up, beaming with hope and joy. “O, father ! O, mother ! will you indeed—”

“We will indeed say nothing,” the father answered, smiling ; “nothing, until to-morrow. Then we will all three talk the matter quietly over, and see what can be done.”

Of course, I knew to a certainty the conclusion they would come to.

CHAPTER V.

LATE that night, as I sat up pondering over all that had happened, Mrs. Halifax came into my room.

She looked round ; asked me, according to her wont, if there was anything I wanted before she retired for the night ?—(Ursula was as good to me as any sister)—then stood by my easy-chair. I would not meet her eyes, but I saw her hands fluttering in their restless way.

I pointed to her accustomed chair.

“No ; I can’t sit down. I must say good-night.” Then, coming at once to the point—
“Phineas, you are always up first in the morning. Will you—John thinks it had better be you—will you give a message from us to—Maud’s governess ?”

“ Yes. What shall I say ? ”

“ Merely, that we request she will not leave until we have seen her.”

If Miss Silver had overheard the manner and tone of that “ request,” I doubt if it would not have hastened rather than delayed her departure. But, God help the poor mother ! her wounds were still fresh.

“ Would it not be better,” I suggested, “ if you were to write to her ? ”

“ I can’t ; no, I can’t ”—spoken with the sharpness of exceeding pain. Soon after, as meaning a faint apology, she added, “ I am so tired ; we are very late to-night.”

“ Yes ; it is almost morning. I thought you were both in bed.”

“ No ; we have been sitting talking in Guy’s room. His father thought it would be better.”

“ And is all settled ? ”

“ Yes.”

Having told me this, and having as it were by such a conclusion confessed it was right the question should be thus “ settled,” Guy’s mother seemed more herself.

“ Yes,” she repeated ; “ John thinks it ought

to be. At least, that she should know Guy's—the feeling with which Guy regards her. If, after the probation of a year, it still remains, and he is content to begin life on a small income, we have given our consent to our son's marriage."

It struck me, yet not as a thing unnatural, how the mother's mind entirely dwelt on the one party in this matter—"Guy's feelings"—"Our son's marriage"—and so on. The other side of the question, or the possibility of any hindrance there, never seemed to enter her imagination. Perhaps it would not, even into mine, for I shared the family faith in its best-beloved Guy; but for Mrs. Halifax's so entirely ignoring the notion that any consent except her son's and his parents' was necessary to this marriage.

"It will not part him from us so very much, you see, Phineas," she said, evidently trying to view the bright side—"and she has no relatives living—not one. For income—Guy will have the entire profit of the Norton Bury mills; and they might begin, as we did, in the old Norton Bury house—the dear old house."

The thought of her own young days seemed to come, soothingly and sweet, taking the sting out of her pain, showing her how it was but right and justice that Nature's holy law should be fulfilled—that children in their turn should love, and marry, and be happy, like their parents.

“Yes,” she answered, as I gently hinted this ; “I know you are right ; all is quite right, and as it should be, though it was a shock at first. No matter ; John esteems her—John likes her. For me—oh ! I shall make a capital—what is it ?—a capital *mother-in-law*—in time !”

With that smile, which was almost cheerful, she bade me good-night,—rather hastily perhaps, as if she wished to leave me while her cheerfulness lasted. Then I heard her step along the passage, pausing once,—most likely at Guy's room-door ; her own closed, and the house was in silence.

I rose early in the morning ;—not one whit too early, for I met Miss Silver in the hall, bonnetted and shawled, carrying down with her own hands a portion of her chattels. She evidently con-

templated an immediate departure. It was with the greatest difficulty that, without betraying my reasons, which of course was impossible, I could persuade her to change her determination.

Poor girl ! last night's events had apparently shaken her from that indifference which she seemed to think the best armour of a helpless, proud governess against the world. She would scarcely listen to a word. She was in extreme agitation ; half-a-dozen times she insisted on leaving, and then sat down again.

I had not given her credit for so much wholesome irresolution—so much genuine feeling. Her manner almost convinced me of a fact which every one else seemed to hold as certain, but which I myself should have liked to see proved : namely, that Guy, in asking her love, would have, what in every right and happy marriage a man ought to have,—the knowledge that the love was his before he asked for it.

Seeing this, my heart warmed to the girl. I respected her brave departure—I rejoiced that it was needless. Willingly I would have quieted her distress with some hopeful, ambiguous word,

but that would have been trenching, as no one ever ought to trench, on the lover's sole right. So I held my tongue, watching with an amused pleasure the colour hovering to and fro that usually impassive face. At last, at the opening of the study-door—we stood in the hall still—those blushes rose up to her forehead in one involuntary tide.

But it was only Edwin, who had lately taken to a habit of getting up very early,—to study mathematics. He looked surprised at seeing me with Miss Silver.

“What is that box? She is not going?”

“No; I have been entreating her not. Add your persuasions, Edwin.”

For Edwin, with all his quietness, was a lad of much wisdom, great influence, and no little penetration. I inclined to believe that though as yet he had not been let into the secret of last night, he guessed it pretty well already.

He might have done, by the peculiar manner in which he went up to the governess and took her hand.

“Pray stay; I wish it.”

She made no more ado, but stayed.

I left her with Edwin, and took my usual morning walk, up and down the garden, till breakfast-time.

A strange and painful breakfast it was, even though the most important element in its painfulness, Guy, was happily absent. The rest of us kept up a fragmentary, awkward conversation, every one round the table looking, as indeed one might have expected they would look,—with one exception.

Miss Silver, who, from her behaviour last night, and her demeanour to me this morning, I had supposed would now have gathered up all her haughtiness to resist Guy's parents—as unwitting both of his feelings and their intentions towards her, a young lady of her proud spirit might well resist—was, to my astonishment, as mild and meek as this soft spring morning. Nay, like it, seemed often on the very verge of the melting mood. More than once, her drooping eye-lashes were gemmed with tears. And when, the breakfast-table being quickly deserted—Edwin, indeed, had left it almost immediately—she, sitting absently in her place, was

gently touched by Mrs. Halifax, she started up, with the same vivid rush of colour that I had before noticed. It completely altered the expression of her face ; made her look ten years younger—ten years happier, and, being happier, ten times more amiable.

This expression—I was not the only one to notice it—was, by some intuition, reflected on the mother's. It made softer than any speech of hers to Miss Silver—the few words :

“ My dear, will you come with me into the study ? ”

“ To lessons ? Yes. I beg your pardon ! Maud—where is Maud ? ”

“ Never mind lessons just yet. We will have a little chat with my son. Uncle Phineas, you'll come ? Will you come, too, my dear ? ”

“ If you wish it.” And with an air of unwonted obedience, she followed Mrs. Halifax.

Poor Guy !—confused young lover !—meeting for the first time after his confession the acknowledged object of his preference—I really felt sorry for him ! And, except that women have generally twice as much self-control in such cases

as men, and Miss Silver proved it—I might even have been sorry for her. But then her uncertainties would soon be over. She had not to make—all her family being aware she was then and there making it—that terrible “offer of marriage,” which, I am given to understand, is, even under the most favourable circumstances, as formidable as going up to the cannon’s mouth.

I speak of it jestingly, as we all jested uneasily that morning, save Mrs. Halifax, who scarcely spoke a word. At length, when Miss Silver, growing painfully restless, again referred to “lessons,” she said :

“Not yet. I want Maud for half an hour. Will you be so kind as to take my place and sit with my son the while?”

“Oh, certainly !”

I was vexed with her—really vexed—for that ready assent ; but then who knows the ins and outs of women’s ways ? At any rate, for Guy’s sake this must be got over—the quicker the better. His mother rose.

“My son, my dear boy !” She leant over him, whispering—I think she kissed him—then

slowly, quietly, she walked out of the study. I followed. Outside the door we parted, and I heard her go up-stairs to her own room.

It might have been half an hour afterwards, when Maud and I, coming in from the garden, met her standing in the hall. No one was with her, and she was doing nothing; two very remarkable facts in the daily life of the mother of the family.

Maud ran up to her with some primroses.

"Very pretty, very pretty, my child."

"But you don't look at them—you don't care for them—I'll go and shew them to Miss Silver."

"No," was the hasty answer. "Come back, Maud—Miss Silver is occupied."

Making some excuse, I sent the child away, for I saw that even Maud's presence was intolerable to her mother. That poor mother, whose suspense was growing into positive agony!

She waited—standing at the dining-room window—listening—going in and out of the hall,—for another ten minutes.

"It is very strange—very strange indeed.

He promised to come to tell me ; surely at least he ought to come and tell me first—me, his mother—”

She stopped at the word, oppressed by an anguish of pain.

“ Hark ! was that the study door ? ”

“ I think so ; one minute more and you will be quite certain.”

Ay ! one minute more, and we *were* quite certain. The young lover entered — his bitter tidings written on his face.

“ She has refused me, mother. I never shall be happy more.”

Poor Guy !—I slipped out of his sight and left the lad alone with his mother.

Another hour passed of this strange, strange day. The house seemed painfully quiet. Maud, disconsolate and cross, had taken herself away to the beech-wood with Walter ; the father and Edwin were busy at the mills, and had sent word that neither would return to dinner. I wandered from room to room, always excepting that shut-up room where, as I took care, no one should disturb the mother and son.

At last, I heard them both going up-stairs—Guy was still too lame to walk without assistance. I heard the poor lad's fretful tones, and the soothing, cheerful voice that answered them. "Verily," thought I, "if, since he must fall in love, Guy had only fixed his ideal standard of womanhood a little nearer home—if he had only chosen for his wife a woman a little more like his mother!" But I suppose that would have been expecting impossibilities.

Well, he had been refused!—our Guy, whom we all would have imagined irresistible—our Guy, "whom to look on was to love." Some harsh folk might say this might be a good lesson for the lad—nay, for most lads; but I deny it.—I doubt if any young man, meeting at the outset of life a rejection like this, which either ignorance or heedlessness on the woman's part has made totally unexpected, ever is the better for it: perhaps, for many years, cruelly the worse. For, most women being quicksighted about love, and most men—especially very young men—blind enough in its betrayal,—any woman who wilfully allows an offer only to refuse it, lowers

not only herself but her whole sex, for long, long time after, in the lover's eyes. At least, I think so ;—as I was thinking, in the way old bachelors are prone to moralize over such things, when, coming out of Guy's room, I met Mrs. Halifax.

She crossed the passage, hastily but noiselessly, to the small anti-room which Miss Silver had for her own private study—out of which half-a-dozen stairs led to the chamber where she and her pupil slept. The anti-room was open, the bed-chamber door closed.

“She is in there ?”

“I believe she is.”

Guy's mother stood irresolute. Her knit brow and nervous manner betrayed some determination she had come to, which had cost her hard ; suddenly she turned to me.

“Keep the children out of the way, will you, Phineas ? Don't let them know—don't let anybody know—about Guy.”

“Of course not.”

“There is some mistake—there *must* be some mistake. Perhaps she is not sure of our

consent—his father's and mine ; very right of her—very right ! I honour her for her indecision. But she must be assured to the contrary—my boy's comfort must not be sacrificed. You understand, Phineas ?”

Ay, perhaps better than she did herself, poor mother !

Yet, when in answer to the hasty knock, I caught a glimpse of Miss Silver opening the door—Miss Silver, with hair all falling down dishevelled, and features swollen with crying,—I went away completely at fault, as the standers-by seem doomed to be in all love affairs. I began to hope that this would settle itself somehow—in all parties understanding one another after the good old romantic fashion, and “ living very happy to the end of their lives.”

I saw nothing more of any one, until tea time : when Mrs. Halifax and the governess came in together. Something in their manner struck me—one being subdued and gentle, the other tender and kind. Both, however, were exceedingly grave—nay, sad ; but it appeared to be that sadness which is received as inevitable,

and is quite distinct from either anger or resentment.

Neither Guy, nor Edwin, nor the father, were present. When John's voice was heard in the hall, Miss Silver had just risen to retire with Maud.

"Good night, for I shall not come down stairs again," she said hastily.

"Good night," the mother answered in the same whisper—rose, kissed her kindly, and let her go.

When Edwin and his father appeared, they too looked remarkably grave—as grave as if they had known by intuition all the trouble in the house. Of course, no one referred to it. The mother merely noticed how late they were, and how tired they both looked. Supper passed in silence, and then Edwin took up his candle to go to bed.

His father called him back. "Edwin, you will remember?"

"I will, father."

"Something is amiss with Edwin," said his mother, when the two younger boys had closed

the door behind them. "What did you wish him to remember?"

Her husband's sole reply was to draw her to him with that peculiarly tender gaze, which she knew well to be the fore-warning of trouble; trouble he could not save her from—could only help her to bear. Ursula laid her head on his shoulder with one deep sob of long-smothered pain.

"I suppose you know all. I thought you would soon guess. Oh, John, our happy days are over! Our children are children no more."

"But ours still, love—always will be ours."

"What of that, when we can no longer make them happy? When they look for happiness to others and not to us? My own poor boy! To think that his mother can neither give him comfort, nor save him pain, any more."

She wept bitterly.

When she was somewhat soothed, John, making her sit down by him, but turning his face a little from her, bade her tell him all that had happened to-day. A few words explained the history of Guy's rejection, and its cause.

"She loves some one else. When I—as his mother—went and asked her the question, she told me so."

"And what did you say?"

"What could I say? I could not blame her. I was even sorry for her. She cried so bitterly, and begged me to forgive her. I said I did, freely, and hoped she would be happy."

"That was right. I am glad you said so. Did she tell you who he—this lover, was?"

"No. She said she could not, until he gave her permission. That whether they would ever be married, she did not know. She knew nothing, save that he was good and kind, and the only creature in the world who had ever cared for her."

"Poor girl!"

"John,"—startled by his manner—"you have something to tell me? You know who this is—this man who has stood between my son and his happiness?"

"Yes, I do know."

I cannot say how far the mother saw—what, as if by a flash of lightning, *I* did; but she

looked up in her husband's face, with a sudden speechless dread.

"Love, it is a great misfortune, but it is no one's blame—neither ours, nor theirs—they never thought of Guy's loving her. He says so—Edwin himself."

"Is it Edwin?"—in a cry as if her heart was breaking. "His own brother—his very own brother! O my poor Guy!"

Well might the mother mourn! Well might the father look as if years of care had been added to his life that day! For a disaster like this happening in any household—especially a household where love is recognized as a tangible truth, neither to be laughed at, passed carelessly over, nor lectured down—makes the family cease to be a family, in many things, from henceforward. The two strongest feelings of life clash; the bond of brotherly unity, in its perfectness, is broken for ever.

For some minutes we sat, bewildered as it were, thinking of the tale as if it had been told of some other family than ours. Mechanically the mother raised her eyes; the first object they

chanced to meet was a rude water-colour drawing, kept, coarse daub as it was, because it was the only reminder we had of what never could be recalled—one red-cheeked child with a hoop, staring at another red-cheeked child with a nosegay—supposed to represent little Edwin and little Guy.

“Guy taught Edwin to walk. Edwin made Guy learn his letters. How fond they were of one another—those two boys. Now—brother will be set against brother! They will never feel like brothers—never again.”

“Love—”

“Don’t, John! don’t speak to me just yet. It is so terrible to think of. Both my boys—both my two noble boys! to be made miserable for that girl’s sake. Oh! that she had never darkened our doors. Oh! that she had never been born.”

“Nay, you must not speak thus. Remember—Edwin loves her—she will be Edwin’s wife.”

“Never!” cried the mother, desperately; “I will not allow it. Guy is the eldest. His brother has acted meanly. So has she. No, John, I will *not* allow it.”

“ You will not allow what has already happened—what Providence has permitted to happen ? Ursula, you forget—they love one another.”

This one fact—this solemn upholding of the pre-eminent right and law of love,—which law John believed in, they both believed in, so sacredly and so strongly—appeared to force itself upon Mrs. Halifax’s mind. Her passion subsided.

“ I cannot judge clearly. You can—always. Husband, help me !”

“ Poor wife—poor mother !” he muttered, caressing her, and in that caress himself all but giving way—“ Alas ! that I should have brought thee into such a sea of trouble.”

Perhaps he referred to the circumstance of his having been the main cause of bringing Miss Silver into our house ; perhaps to his own blindness, or want of parental caution, in throwing the young people continually together. However, John was not one to lament over things inevitable ; or by overweening blame of his own want of foresight, to imply a doubt of the foreseeing of Providence.

"Love," he said, "I fear we have been too anxious to play *Deus ex machinâ* with our children, forgetting in whose Hands are marrying and giving in marriage—life's crosses and life's crowns. Trouble has come when we looked not for it. We can but try to see the right course, and seeing it, to act upon it."

Ursula assented—with a bursting heart it seemed—but still she assented, believing even as in her young days, that her husband's will was wisest, best.

He told her, in few words, all that Edwin had that day confessed to his father; how these two, being much together, had become attached to one another, as young folks will—couples whom no one would ever think suited each for each,—except Nature, and the instinct of their own hearts. Absorbed in this love—which, Edwin solemnly declared, was never openly confessed till this morning—they neither of them ever thought of Guy. And thus things had befallen—things which no earthly power could remove or obliterate—things in which, whatever way we looked, all seemed darkness. We could but walk blindly on, a step at a time, trusting to

that Faith, of which all our lives past had borne confirmation—the firm faith that evil itself is to the simple and God-fearing but the disguised messenger of good.

Something like this John said, talking as his wife loved to hear him talk—every quiet, low word dropping like balm upon her grieved heart ; not trying to deceive her into the notion that pain is not pain, but shewing her how best to bear it. At length she looked up, as if with God's help—and her husband's comforting—she could bear it.

“ Only one thing—Guy does not know. He need not know just yet—not till he is stronger. Surely, Edwin will not tell him ? ”

“ No ; he promised me he would not. Do not start so. Indeed, there is no fear.”

But that very assurance seemed to rouse it. She began straining her ears to catch the least noise in the rooms overhead—the boys' rooms. Guy and Walter shared one ; Edwin had his to himself.

“ They surely will not meet. Yet Guy sometimes likes sitting over Edwin's fire. Hark ! —

was not that the creaking of Guy's room-door?"

"Love—" detaining her.

"I know, John. I am not thinking of going. Guy might suspect something. No, indeed I am not afraid. They were always fond of one another—my boys."

She sat down, violently forcing herself not to listen, not to fear. But the truth was too strong for her.

"Hark! I am sure they are talking. John, you said Edwin promised?"

"Faithfully promised."

"But if, by some accident, Guy found out the truth? Hark! they are talking very loud. That is a chair fallen. Oh, John—don't keep me! My boys—my boys." And she ran upstairs in an agony.

What a sight for a mother's eyes. Two brothers—of whom it had been our boast that from babyhood they had never been known to lift a hand against each other—now struggling together like Cain and Abel. And from the fury in their faces, the quarrel might have had a similar ending.

“Guy!—Edwin!” But the mother might as well have shrieked to the winds.

The father came and parted them. “Boys, are you gone mad? fighting like brutes in this way. Shame, Guy! Edwin, I trusted you.”

“I could not help it, father. He had no right to steal into my room; no right to snatch her letter from me.”

“It was her letter, then?” cried Guy, furiously. “She writes to you? You were writing back to her?”

Edwin made no answer; but held out his hand for the letter, with that look of white passion in him so rarely seen—perhaps not thrice since his infancy. Guy took no heed.

“Give it me back, Guy;—I warn you.”

“Not till I have read it. I have a right.”

“You have none. She is mine.”

“Yours?” Guy laughed in his face.

“Yes, mine. Ask my father—ask my mother. They know.”

“Mother!”—the letter fell from the poor lad’s hand. “Mother, *you* would not deceive

me. He only says it to vex me. I was in a passion, I know. Mother, it isn't true?"

His piteous tone—the almost childish way in which he caught at her sleeve, as she turned from him—ah, poor Guy!

"Edwin, is it my brother Edwin? Who would have thought it?" Half bewildered, he looked from one to the other of us all; but no one spoke, no one contradicted him.

Edwin, his passion quite gone, stooped in a sorrowful and humble way, to pick up his betrothed's letter. Then Guy flew at him, and caught him by the collar.

"You coward!—how dared you?—No, I won't hurt him; she is fond of him. Go away, every one of you. Oh mother, mother, mother!"

He fell on her neck sobbing. She gathered him in her arms, as she had used to do in his childhood; and so we left them.

"As one whom his mother comforteth."

Ay, Prophet of Israel, thou wert wise.

CHAPTER VI.

JOHN and I sat over the study fire till long after midnight.

Many an anxious watch I had kept with him, but none sadder than this. Because now, for the first time, our house was divided against itself. A sorrow had entered it, not from without but from within—a sorrow which we could not meet and bear, as a family. Alas ! darker and darker had the bitter truth forced itself upon us, that neither joy nor affliction would ever find us as a family again.

I think all parents must feel cruelly a pang like this—the first trouble in which they cannot help their children—the first time when those children must learn to stand alone, each for himself, compelled to carry his own burthen and work out, well or ill, his individual life. When the

utmost the wisest or tenderest father can do, is to keep near with outstretched hand that the child may cling to, assured of finding sympathy, counsel, and love.

If this father had stood aloof all his life, on some pinnacle of paternal "pride," paternal "dignity"—if he had not made himself his boys' companion, counsellor, and friend, how great would have been his terrors now !

For, as we both knew well—too well to trust ourselves to say it—if there is one thing in the world that ruins a lad, drives him to desperation, shuts the door of home upon him, and opens many another door, of which the entrance is the very gate of hell—it is such a disappointment as this which had happened to our Guy.

His father saw it all. Saw it clearer, crueller, than even his mother could see. Yet when, very late, almost at dawn, she came in, with the tidings that Guy was himself again now—sleeping as quietly as a child—her husband was able to join in her deep thankfulness, and give her hope for the days to come.

"But what is to be done with Guy?"

"God knows," John answered. But his tone expressed a meaning different from that generally conveyed in the words: a meaning which the mother caught at once, and rested on.

"Ay—you are right. He knows!"—And so they went away together, almost content.

Next morning, I woke late; the sunshine falling across my bed, and the sparrows chattering loud in the ivy. I had been dreaming with a curious pertinacity, of the old days at Rose Cottage, the days when John first fell in love with Ursula.

"Uncle Phineas." I heard myself called.

It was John's son, who sat opposite, with wan, wild eyes, and a settled anguish on his mouth—that merry, handsome mouth, very like his father's—the only really handsome mouth in the family.

"You are up early, my boy."

"What was the good of lying in bed? I am not ill. Besides, I wish to go about as usual. I don't wish anybody to think that—that I care."

He stopped—evidently fighting hard against himself. A new lesson, alas! for our Guy.

“Was I too violent last night? I did not mean it. I mean to be a man. Not the first man whom a lady has refused—eh?” And braving it out, he began to whistle; but the lips fell—the frank brow grew knotted with pain. The lad broke into a passion of misery.

The chief bitterness was, that he had been deceived. Unwittingly, we well believed—but still deceived. Many little things he told me—Guy’s was a nature that at once spent and soothed itself, by talking—of Miss Silver’s extreme gentleness and kindness towards him; a kindness which seemed so like, so cruelly like love.

“Love!—Oh, she loved me. She told me so. Of course!—I was Edwin’s brother.”

Ay, there was the sting, which never could be removed; which might rankle in the boy’s heart for life. He had not only lost his love, but what is more precious than love—faith in woman-kind. He began to make light of his losings—to think the prize was not so great after all. He sat on my bed, singing—Guy had a fine voice and ear—singing, out of mockery, songs

which I had an especial aversion to — light songs written by an Irishman, Mr. Thomas Moore, about girls and wine, and being “far from the lips we love,” but always ready enough “to make love to the lips we are near.” Then, laughing at me, he threw up the window and looked out.

I think it was wrong of those two, wrong and selfish, as all lovers are—young lovers in the flush of their happiness ; I think it was cruel of Edwin and Louise to walk up and down there, in the elder brother’s very eyes.

For a moment he struggled against his passion.

“Uncle Phineas, just look here. How charming ! Ha, ha ! Did you ever see such a couple of fools ?”

Fools, may be, but happy ; happy to the very core—thoroughly engrossed in their happiness. The elder brother was almost maddened by it.

“He must mind what he does—tell him so, Uncle Phineas—it would be safer. He *must* mind, or I will not answer for myself. I was fond of Edwin—I was indeed—but now it seems sometimes as if I *hated* him.”

“Guy !”

“Oh, if it had been a stranger, and not he ! If it had been any one in the world except my brother !”

And in that bitter cry, the lad's heart melted again ; it was such a tender heart—his mother's heart.

After a time he recovered himself, and came down with me to breakfast, as he had insisted upon doing ; met them all, even Miss Silver—and Edwin, who had placed himself by her side with an air of right. These lovers, however deeply grieved they looked—and to do them justice, it was really so—needed not to be grieved over by any of us.

Nor, looking at the father and mother, would we have dared to grieve over *them*. In the silent watches of the night, heart to heart, husband and wife had taken counsel together ; together had carried their sorrow to the only Lightener of burthens. It seemed that theirs was lightened ;—that even in this strange entanglement of fate they were able to wait patiently—trusting unto the Almighty Mercy not only themselves but the children He had given them.

When, breakfast being over, John according to his custom, read the chapter and the prayer—no one rose up or went out; no one refused, even in this anguish of strife, jealousy, and disunion—to repeat after him the “Our Father” of their childhood.

I believe every one of us remembered for years, with an awe that was not altogether pain, this morning’s chapter and prayer.

When it was ended, worldly troubles closed round us again.

Nothing seemed natural. We hung about in twos and threes, uncertain what to do. Guy walked up and down, alone. His mother asked him if, seeing his foot was so well, he would like to go down to the mills as usual; but he declined. Miss Silver made some suggestion about “lessons,” which Edwin jealously negatived immediately and proposed that she and Maud should take a drive somewhere.

Mrs. Halifax eagerly assented. “Lady Oldtower has been wanting them both for some time. You would like to go, would you not, for a day or two?” said she, addressing the governess.

Guy caught at this. "Going away, are you? When?"

He put the question to Miss Silver direct—his eyes blazing right into her own. She made some confused reply, about "leaving immediately."

"In the carriage, of course? Shall I have the honour of driving you?"

"No," said Edwin, decisively.

A fierce, vindictive look passed between the brothers—a look terrible in itself—more terrible in its warning of days to come. No wonder the mother shuddered—no wonder the young betrothed, pale and alarmed, slipped out of the room. Edwin followed her. Then Guy, snatching up his sister, lifted her roughly on his knee.

"Come along, Maud. You'll be my girl now. Nobody else wants you. Kiss me, child."

But the little lady drew back.

"So, you hate me too? Edwin has been teaching you? Very well. Get away, you cheat!"

He pushed her violently aside. Maud began to cry.

Her father looked up from his book—the book he had not been reading—though he had seemingly thought it best to take no notice of what was passing around him.

“Come here, Maud my child. Guy, you should not be unkind to your little sister. Try and command yourself, my dear boy!”

The words, though spoken gently, almost in a whisper, were more than the lad’s chafed spirit could brook.

“Father, you insult me. I will not bear it. I will quit the room.”

He went out, shutting the door passionately after him. His mother rose up to follow him—then sat down again. The eyes that she lifted to her husband were deprecating, beseeching, heavy with a speechless pain.

For John—he said nothing. Not though, as was plain to see, this, the first angry or disrespectful word he had ever received from any one of his children, struck him like an arrow; for a moment stirred him even to wrath—holy wrath—the just displeasure of a father who feels that the least portion of his child’s sin is the

sin against *him*. Perhaps this very feeling, distinct from, and far beyond, all personal indignation, all sense of offended dignity, made the anger strangely brief—so brief, that when the other children, awed and startled, looked for some ebullition of it,—lo ! it was all gone. In its stead was something at which the children, more awed still, crept out of the room.

Ursula even, alarmed, looked in his face as if for the first time she could not comprehend her husband.

“ John, you should forgive poor Guy ; he did not intend any harm.”

“ No—no.”

“ And he is so very miserable. Never before did he fail in his duty to you.”

“ But what if I have failed in mine to him ?—What if—you used to say I could not understand Guy—what if I have come short towards him ? I, that am accountable to God for every one of my children.”

“ John—John”—she knelt down and put her arms round his neck. “ Husband, do not look unhappy. I did not mean to blame you—

we may be wrong, both of us—all of us. But we will not be afraid. We know Who pities us, even as we pity our children.”

Thus she spoke, and more to the same purport; but it was a long time before her words brought any consolation. Then the parents talked together, trying to arrange some plan whereby Guy's mind might be occupied and soothed, or else Edwin removed out of his sight for a little while. Once I hinted at the advantage of Guy's leaving home; but Mrs. Halifax seemed to shrink from this project as though it were a foreboding of perpetual exile.

“No, no; anything but that. Besides, Guy would not wish it. He has never left me in his life. His going would seem like the general breaking up of the family.”

Alas! she did not, would not see that the family was already “broken.” Broken, more than either absence, marriage, or death itself could have effected.

One thing more we had to consider—a thing at once natural and right in any family, namely, how to hide its wounds from the chattering,

scandalous world. And so, when by a happy chance there came over that morning our good friend Lady Oldtower and her carriage full of daughters, Mrs. Halifax communicated, with a simple dignity that quelled all comment or inquiry, the fact of "my son Edwin's engagement," and accepted the invitation for Maud and Miss Silver, which was willingly repeated and pressed.

One thing I noticed, that in speaking either of or to the girl who in a single day from merely the governess had become, and was sedulously treated as, our own, Mrs. Halifax invariably called her as heretofore, "Miss Silver," or "my dear;" never by any chance "Louise," or "Mademoiselle D'Argent."

Before she left Beechwood, Edwin came in and hurriedly spoke to his mother. What he said was evidently painful to both.

"I am not aware of it, Edwin; I had not the slightest intention of offending her. Is she already made your judge and referee as to the actions of your mother?"

Edwin was a good lad, though perhaps a little less loving than the rest of the boys. His

self-restraint, his exceeding patience, lulled the threatened storm.

“But you will be kind to her, mother?—I know you will.”

“Did I not say so?”

“And I may bring her to you here?”

“If you choose.”

It was the first open recognition between the mother and her son's betrothed. Their other meeting had been in public when, with a sedulous dread, both had behaved exactly as usual, and no word or manner had betrayed their altered relations. Now, when for the first time it was needful for Miss Silver to be received as a daughter elect, with all the natural sympathy due from one woman to another under similar circumstances, all the warmth of kindness due from a mother to her son's chosen wife—then the want, the mournful want, made itself felt.

Mrs. Halifax stood at the dining-room window, trying vainly to regain self-control.

“If I could only love her!—If only she had made me love her!” she muttered, over and over again.

I hoped, from the bottom of my soul, that Edwin had not heard her—had not seen her involuntary recoil, as he led to his mother his handsome girl that he seemed so proud of, his happy, affianced wife. Happiness melts some natures, like spring and sunshine. Louise looked up with swimming eyes.

“Oh! be kind to me!—Nobody was ever kind to me till I came here!”

The good heart gave way: Mrs. Halifax opened her arms.

“Be true to Edwin—love Edwin, and I shall love you—I am sure I shall.”

Kissing her once or twice, the mother let fall a few tears; then sat down, still keeping the girl's hand, and busying herself with various little kindnesses about her.

“Are you sure you are well wrapped up? Edwin, see that she has my fur cloak in the carriage. What cold fingers!—Have some wine before you start, my dear.”

Miss Silver altogether melted; sobbing, she murmured something about forgiveness.

“Nay, did I say a word about forgiveness?”

Then do not you. Let us be patient—we shall all be happy in time.”

“And—Guy?”

“Guy will be himself soon,” returned the mother, rather proudly. “We will not mention him, if you please, my dear.”

At this moment, Guy must have heard the carriage-wheels and guessed Miss Silver was going; for he appeared at the parlour door. He found his mother toying with Miss Silver’s hand;—Edwin standing by, proud and glad, with his arm clasped round Louise.

He did not remove it. In his brother’s very face,—perhaps because of the expression of that face—the lover held fast his own.

Mrs. Halifax rose up, alarmed. “She is just going, Guy. Shake hands, and bid her good-bye.”

The girl’s hand, which was sorrowfully and kindly extended, Guy snatched and held fast.

“Let her pass,” cried Edwin, angrily.

“Most certainly. I have not the least wish to detain her. Good-bye! A pleasant journey!” And still keeping her hand, he gazed with burning eyes on the features he had so loved—as

boys do love—with a wild imaginative passion, kindled by beauty alone. “I shall claim my right—just for once—may I, sister Louise?”

With a glance of defiance at Edwin, Guy caught his brother's betrothed round the waist and kissed her—once—twice—savagely.

It was done so suddenly and under such an ingenious disguise of “right,” that open vengeance was impossible. But as Edwin hurried Louise away, the look that passed between the two young men was enough to blot out henceforward all friendship, all brotherhood. That insult would never be forgotten.

She was gone—the house was free of her and Edwin too. Guy was left alone with me and his mother.

Mrs. Halifax sat sewing. She seemed to take no note of his comings and goings—his restless starts—his fits of dark musing, when his face grew like the face of some stranger, some one whom we would have shrunk from—any one but our own merry Guy.

“Mother”—the voice startled me—such irritable, intolerable bitterness, marred its once pleasant tones. “When do they come back?”

“Do you mean——”

“I mean those people.”

“In a week or so. Your brother returns to-night, of course.”

“My *brother*, eh? Better not say it—it’s an ugly word.”

Mrs. Halifax attempted no reproof; she knew that it would have been useless—worse than useless, then.

“Mother,” Guy said at last, coming up and leaning against her chair, “you must let me go.”

“Where, my son?”

“Anywhere—out of their sight—those two. You see, I cannot bear it. It maddens me—makes me wicked—makes me not myself. Or rather makes me truly *myself*, which is altogether wicked.”

“No, Guy—no, my own boy. Have patience—all this will pass away.”

“It might, if I had anything to do. Mother,” kneeling down by her with a piteous gaze—“mother, you need not look so wretched. I wouldn’t harm Edwin—would not take from him his happiness; but to live in sight of it

day after day, hour after hour—I can't do it! Do not ask me—let me get away.”

“But where?”

“Anywhere, as I said; only let me go far away from them, where no possible news of them can reach me. In some place, oh, mother darling! where I can trouble no one and make no one miserable.”

The mother feebly shook her head. As if such a spot could be found on earth, while *she* lived!

But she saw that Guy was right. To expect him to remain at home was cruelty. As he had said, he could not bear it—few could. Few even among women—of men much fewer. One great renunciation is possible, sometimes easy, as death may be; but to “die daily?”—In youth, too, with all the passions vehement, the self-knowledge and self-control small? No; Nature herself, in that universal desire to escape, which comes with such a trial, hints at the unnaturalness of the ordeal; in which, soon or late, the weak become paralyzed or callous; the strong—God help them!—are apt to turn wicked.

Guy's instinct of flight was, his mother felt, wisest, safest, best.

“ My boy, you shall have your desire ; you shall go.”

I had not expected it of her—at least, not so immediately. I had thought, bound up in him as she was, accustomed to his daily sight, his daily fondness—for he was more with her, and “ petted” her more than any other of the children—I had thought to have seen some reluctance, some grieved entreaty—but no ! Not even when, gaining her consent, the boy looked up as if her allowing him to quit her was the greatest kindness she had ever in his life bestowed.

“ And when shall I go ?”

“ Whenever you choose.”

“ To-day ; perhaps I might get away to-day ?”

“ You can, if you wish, my dear boy.”

But no sooner had she said it, than the full force and meaning of the renunciation seemed to burst upon her. Her fingers, which had been smoothing Guy’s hand as it lay on her lap, tightly closed round it ; with the other hand she put back his hair, gazing—gazing, as if it were impossible to part with him.

“ Guy—oh, Guy, my heart is breaking ! Promise that you will try to be yourself again—

that you will never be anything other than my own good boy, if I agree to let you go?"

What he answered, or what further passed between them, was not for me either to hear or to know. I left the room immediately.

When, some time after John's hour for returning from the mills, I also returned to the house, I found that everything was settled for Guy's immediate departure.

There was some business in Spain—something about Andalusian wool—which his father made the ostensible reason for the journey. It would be enough to occupy him and distract his mind, besides giving him constant necessity of change. And, they say, travel is the best cure for the heart-ache. We hoped it might prove so.

Perhaps the sorest point, and one that had been left undecided till both parents saw that in Guy's present mood any opposition was hurtful, even dangerous, was the lad's obstinate determination to depart alone. He refused his mother's companionship to London, even his father's across the country to the nearest point where one of those new and dangerous things called railways tempted travellers to their destruction.

But Guy would go by it—the maddest and strangest way of locomotion pleased him best. So it was settled he should go, as he pleaded, this very day.

A strange day it seemed—long and yet how short! Mrs. Halifax was incessantly busy. I caught sight of her now and then, flitting from room to room, with Guy's books in her hand—Guy's linen thrown across her arm. Sometimes she stood a few minutes by the window, doing a few stitches of necessary work, which, when even nurse Watkins offered to do—Jenny, who had been a rosy lass when Guy was born—she refused abruptly, and went stitching on.

There were no regular meals that day; better not, perhaps. I saw John come up to his wife as she stood sewing, and bring her a piece of bread and a glass of wine—but she could not touch either.

“Mother, try,” whispered Guy, mournfully. “What will become of me if I have made you ill?”

“Oh, no fear, no fear!” She smiled, took the wine and swallowed it—broke off a bit of the bread,—and went on with her work.

The last hour or two passed so confusedly that I do not well remember them. I can only call to mind seeing Guy and his mother everywhere side by side, doing everything together, as if grudging each instant remaining till the final instant came. I have also a vivid impression of her astonishing composure, of her calm voice when talking to Guy about indefinite trifles, or, though that was seldom, to any other of us. It never faltered—never lost its rich, round, cheerfulness of tone; as if she wished him to carry it as such, and no other—the familiar mother's voice—in his memory across the seas.

Once only it grew sharp, when Walter, who hovered about disconsolately, knelt down to fasten his brother's portmanteau.

"No! Let go! I can do everything myself."

And now the time was fast flying—her boy must depart.

All the household collected in the hall to bid Mr. Guy good-bye—Mr. Guy, whom everybody was so fond of. They believed—which was all that any one, save ourselves, ever believed or knew

—that sudden business had called him away on a long and anxious journey. They lingered about him, respectfully, with eager, honest blessings, such as it was good the lad should have—good that he should bear away with him from England and from home.

Finally, Guy, his father and his mother, went into the study by themselves. Soon even his father came out and shut the door, that there should be not a single witness to the last few words between mother and son. These being over, they both came into the hall together, brave and calm—which calmness was maintained even to the last good-bye.

Thus we sent our Guy away, cheerfully and with blessings—away into the wide, dangerous world; alone, with no guard or restraint, except—(and in that *except* lay the whole mystery of our cheerfulness)—the fear of God, his father's counsels, and his mother's prayers.

CHAPTER VII.

Two years rolled over Beechwood—two uneventful years. The last of the children ceased to be a child ; and we prepared for that great era in all household history, the first marriage in the family. It was to be celebrated very quietly, as Edwin and Louise both desired. Time had healed over many a pang, and taught many a soothing lesson ; still it could not be supposed that this marriage was without its painfulness.

Guy still remained abroad ; his going had produced the happy result intended. Month after month his letters came, each more hopeful than the last, each bringing balm to the mother's heart. Then he wrote to others besides his mother: Maud and Walter replied to him in long home-histories ; and began to talk without hesitation—

nay, with great pride and pleasure—of “my brother who is abroad.”

The family wound seemed closing, the family peace about to be restored ; Maud even fancied Guy ought to come home to “our wedding;”—but then she had never been told the whole of past circumstances ; and, besides, she was still too young to understand love matters. Yet so mercifully had time smoothed down all things, that it sometimes appeared even to us elders as if those three days of bitterness were a mere dream—as if the year we dreaded had passed as calmly as any other year. Save that in this interval Ursula’s hair began to turn from brown to grey ; and John first mentioned, so cursorily that I cannot even now remember when or where, that slight pain, almost too slight to complain of, which he said warned him in climbing Enderley Hill that he could not climb as fast as when he was young. And I returned his smile, telling him we were evidently both growing old men ; and must soon set our faces to descend the hill of life together.—Easy enough I was in saying this, thinking, as I often did, with great content, that

there was not the faintest doubt which of us would reach the bottom first.

Yet I was glad to have safely passed my half century of life—glad to have seen many of John's cares laid to rest, more especially those external troubles which I have not lately referred to—for, indeed, they were absorbed and forgotten in the home-troubles that came after. He had lived down all slanders, as he said he would. Far and near travelled the story of the day when Jessop's bank was so near breaking; far and near, though secretly—for we found it out chiefly by its results—poor people whispered the tale of a gentleman who had been attacked on the high roads, and whose only attempt at bringing the robbers to justice was to help the widow of one and send the others safe out of the country, at his own expense, not Government's. None of these were notable or showy deeds—scarcely one of them got, even under the disguise of asterisks, into the newspapers; the "Norton Bury Mercury," for its last dying sting, still complained, (and very justly), that there was not a gentleman in the county whose name so sel-

dom headed a charity subscription as that of John Halifax, Esquire, of Beechwood. But the right made its way, as, soon or late, the right always does ; he believed his good name was able to defend itself, and it did defend itself ; he had faith in the only victory worth having—the universal victory of Truth ; and truth conquered at last.

To drive with him across the country—he never carried pistols now—or to walk with him, as one day before Edwin's wedding we walked, a goodly tribe, through the familiar streets of Norton Bury,—was a perpetual pleasure to the rest of the family. Everybody knew him, everybody greeted him, everybody smiled as he passed—as though his presence and his recognition were good things to have and to win. His wife often laughed, and said she doubted whether even Mr. O'Connell of Derrynane, who was just now making a commotion in Ireland, lighting the fire of religious and political discord from one end to the other of County Clare ;—she doubted if even Daniel O'Connell had more popularity among his own

people than John Halifax had in the honest neighbourhood where he had lived so long.

Mrs. Halifax herself was remarkably gay this morning. She had had letters from Guy; together with a lovely present, for which he said he had ransacked all the *magazins des modes* in Paris—a white embroidered China shawl. It had arrived this morning—Lord Ravenel being the bearer. This was not the first time by many that he had brought us news of our Guy—and thereby made himself welcome at Beechwood. More welcome than he might have been otherwise; for his manner of life was so different from ours. Not that Lord Ravenel could be accused of any likeness to his father; but blood is blood, and education and habits are not to be easily overcome. The boys laughed at him for his aristocratic languid ways; Maud teased him for his mild cynicism and the little interest he seemed to take in anything; while the mother herself was somewhat restless about his coming, wondering what possible good his acquaintance could do to us, or ours to him, seeing we moved in totally different spheres. But John himself was invariably kind, nay, tender over him—

we all guessed why. And perhaps even had not the young man had so many good points, while his faults were more negations than positive ill qualities, we likewise should have been tender over him—for Muriel's sake.

He had arrived at Beechwood this morning, and falling as usual into our family routine, had come with us to Norton Bury. He looked up with more interest than usual in his pensive eyes, as he crossed the threshold of our old house, and told Maud how he had come there many years ago with his father.

“That was the first time I ever met your father,” I overheard him say to Maud—not without feeling; as if he thought he owed fate some gratitude for the meeting.

Mrs. Halifax, in the casual civil enquiry which was all the old Earl ever won in our house, asked after the health of Lord Luxmore.

“He is still at Compiègne. Does not Guy mention him? Lord Luxmore takes the greatest pleasure in Guy's society.”

By her start, this was evidently new and not welcome tidings to Guy's mother. No wonder.

Any mother in England would have shrank from the thought that her best-beloved son—especially a young man of Guy's temperament and under Guy's present circumstances—was thrown into the society which now surrounded the debauched dotage of the too-notorious Earl of Luxmore.

“My son did not mention it. He has been too much occupied in business matters, to write home frequently, since he reached Paris. However his stay there is limited ;” and this seemed to relieve her. “I doubt if he will have much time left to visit Compiègne.”

She said no more than this, of course, to Lord Luxmore's son ; but her disquiet was sufficiently apparent.

“It was I who brought your son to Compiègne—where he is a universal favourite, from his wit and liveliness. I know no one who is a more pleasant companion than Guy.”

Guy's mother bowed—but coldly.

“I think, Mrs. Halifax, you are aware that the Earl's tastes and mine differ widely—have always differed. But he is an old man, and I

am his only son. He likes to see me sometimes, and I go :—though, I must confess, I take little pleasure in the circle he has around him.”

“In which circle, as I understand, my son is constantly included?”

“Why not? It is a very brilliant circle. The whole court of Charles Dix can afford none more amusing. For the rest, what matters? One learns to take things as they seem, without peering below the surface. One wearies of impotent Quixotism against unconquerable evils.”

“That is not our creed at Beechwood,” said Mrs. Halifax abruptly, as she ceased the conversation. But ever and anon it seemed to recur to her mind—ay, through all the mirth of the young people,—all the graver pleasure which the father took in the happiness of his son Edwin; his good son, who had never given him a single care. He declared, this settling of Edwin had been to him almost as good as the days when he himself used to come of evenings, hammer in hand, to put up shelves in the house, or nail the currant-bushes against the wall, doing everything *con amore*, and with the utmost

care, knowing it would come under the quick observant eyes of Ursula March.

“That is, of Ursula Halifax—for I don’t think I let her see a single one of my wonderful doings until she was Ursula Halifax.—Do you remember, Phineas, when you came to visit us the first time, and found us gardening?”

“And she had on a white gown and a straw hat with blue ribbons. What a young thing she looked!—hardly any older than Mistress Maud here.”

John put his arm round his wife’s waist—not so slender as it had been, but comely and graceful still, repeating—with something of the musical cadence of his boyish readings of poetry—a line or two from the sweet old English song :

“And when with anger Time transported
Shall think to rob us of our joys,
You’ll in your girls again be courted,
And I’ll go wooing with my boys.”

Ursula laughed, and for the time being the shadow passed from her countenance. Her husband had happily not noticed it : and appa-

rently she did not wish to tell him her trouble. She let him spend a happy day, and even grew happy herself in response to his care to make her so, by the resolute putting away of all painful present thoughts, and calling back of sweet and soothing memories belonging to this their old married home. John seemed determined that if possible, the marriage that was to be should be as sacred and as hopeful as their own.

So full of it were we all, that not until the day after, when Lord Ravenel had left us,—longing apparently to be asked to stay the wedding, but John did not ask him—I remembered what he had said about Guy's association with Lord Luxmore's set. It was recalled to me by the mother's anxious face, as she gave me a foreign letter to post.

“Post it yourself, will you, Phineas? I would not have it miscarry, or be late in its arrival, on any account.”

No, for I saw it was to her son, at Paris.

“It will be the last letter I shall need to write,” she added, again lingering over it, to be certain that all was correct—the address being

somewhat illegible for that free, firm hand of hers. "My boy is coming home."

"Guy coming home ! To the marriage?"

"No ; but immediately after. He is quite himself now. He longs to come home."

"And his mother?"

His mother could not speak. Like light to her eyes, like life to her heart, was the thought of Guy's coming home. All that week she looked ten years younger. With a step buoyant as any girl's, she went about the marriage preparations ; together with other preparations, perhaps dearer still to the motherly heart, where, if any preference did lurk, it was for the one for whom—possibly from whom—she had suffered most, of all her children.

John too, though the father's joy was graver and not unmingled with some anxiety—anxiety which he always put aside in his wife's presence—seemed eager to have his son at home.

"He is eldest son," he repeated more than once, when talking to me of his hope that Guy would now settle permanently at Beechwood. "After myself, the head of the family."

After John ! It was almost ridiculous to peer so far into the future as that.

Of all the happy faces I saw the day before the marriage, I think the happiest was Mrs. Halifax's, as I met her coming out of Guy's room, which ever since he left had been locked up, unoccupied. Now his mother threw open the door with a cheerful air.

"You may go in if you like, Uncle Phineas. Does it not look nice?"

It did indeed, with the fresh white curtains ; the bed laid all in order ; the book-shelves arranged, and even the fowling-piece and fishing-rods put in their right places.

The room looked very neat, I said, with an amused doubt as to how long it was likely to remain so.

"That is true, indeed. How he used to throw his things about ! A sad untidy boy !" And his mother laughed ; but I saw all her features were trembling with emotion.

"He will not be exactly a boy now. I wonder if we shall find him much changed."

"Very likely. Brown, with a great beard ;

he said so in one of his letters. I shall hardly know my boy again.”—With a lighting-up of the eye that furnished a flat contradiction to the mother’s statement.

“Here are some of Mrs. Tod’s roses, I see.”

“She made me take them. She said, Master Guy always used to stop and pick a bunch as he rode past. She hopes she shall see him ride past on Saturday next. Guy must pay her one of his very first visits; the good old soul!”

I hinted, that Guy would have to pay visits half over the country, to judge by the number of invitations I had heard of.

“Yes. Everybody wants to steal my boy. Everybody has a welcome for him.—How bright old Watkins has polished that gun!—Sir Herbert says, Guy must come over to the shooting next week. He used to be exceedingly fond of going to the Manor-house.”

I smiled, to see the innocent smile of this good mother, who would have started at the bare accusation of match-making. Yet I knew she was thinking of her great favourite, pretty Grace Oldtower; who was Grace Oldtower

still, and had refused, gossip said, half the brilliant matches in the county, to the amazement and strong disapprobation of all her friends—excepting Mrs. Halifax.

“Come away, Phineas!” slightly sighing, as if her joy weighed her down, or as if conscious that she was letting fancy carry her too far into the unknown future. “His room is quite ready now, whatever time the boy arrives. Come away.”

She shut and locked the door. To be opened—when?

Morning broke, and none could have desired a brighter marriage-morning. Sunshine out of doors—sunshine on all the faces within; only family faces,—for no other guests had been invited, and we had kept the day as secret as we could; there was nothing John disliked more than a show wedding. Therefore it was with some surprise that while they were all up-stairs adorning themselves for church, Maud and I, standing at the hall-door, saw Lord Ravenel’s travelling carriage drive up to it, and Lord Ravenel himself, with a quicker and more de-

cided gesture than was natural to him, spring out.

Maud ran into the porch ; startling him much, apparently ; for indeed she was a sweet vision of youth, happiness, and grace, in her pretty bridesmaid's dress.

"Is this the wedding-morning? I did not know—I will come again to-morrow ;" and he seemed eager to escape back to his carriage.

This action relieved me from a vague apprehension of ill tidings, and made less painful the first question which rose to my lips, "Had he seen Guy?"

"No."

"We thought for the moment it might be Guy come home," Maud cried. "We are expecting him. Have you heard of him since we saw you? Is he quite well?"

"I believe so."

I thought the answer brief; but then he was looking intently upon Guy's sister, who held his hands in her childish, affectionate way; she had not yet relinquished her privilege of being Lord Ravenel's "pet." When, hesitatingly, he proposed returning to Luxmore, unwilling to

intrude upon the marriage, the little lady would not hear of it for a moment. She took the unexpected guest to the study, left him there with her father, explained to her mother all about his arrival and his having missed seeing Guy—appearing entirely delighted.

I came into the drawing-room, and sat watching the sun shining on marriage-garments and marriage-faces, all as bright as bright could be,—including the mother's. It had clouded over for a few moments, when the postman's ring was heard ; but she said at once that it was most unlikely Guy would write—she had told him there was no need to write. So she stood content, smoothing down the soft folds of her beautiful shawl, which Guy had meant her to wear to-day. This, together with his fond remembrance of her, seemed almost as comfortable as the visible presence of her boy. Her boy, who was sure to come to-morrow.

“ John, is that you ? How softly you came in. And Lord Ravenel ! He knows we are glad to see him. Shall we make him one of our own family for the time being, and take him with us to see Edwin married ? ”

Lord Ravenel bowed.

"Maud tells us you have not seen Guy. I doubt if he will be able to arrive to-day; but we fully expect him to-morrow."

Lord Ravenel bowed again. Mrs. Halifax said something about his speedy return to Luxmore.

"It was on business," John answered quickly, and Ursula made no more enquiries.

She stood, talking with Lord Ravenel—as I could see her stand now, playing with the deep fringe of her shawl; the sun glancing on that rich silk dress of her favourite silver-grey; a picture of matronly grace and calm content, as charming as even the handsome, happy bride.

I was still looking at her, when John called me aside. I followed him into the study.

"Shut the door."

By his tone and look, I knew in a moment that something had happened.

"Yes. I'll tell you presently—if there's time."

While he was speaking, some violent pain—physical or mental, or both—seemed to seize him. I had my hand on the door to call

Ursula, but he held me fast, with a kind of terror.

“Call no one. I am used to it. Water!”

He drank a glassful, which stood by, breathed once or twice heavily, and gradually recovered himself. The colour had scarcely come back into his face when we heard Maud run laughing through the hall.

“Father, where are you? We are waiting for you.”

“I will come in two minutes, my child.”

Having said this, in his own natural voice, he closed the door again, and spoke to me rapidly.

“Phineas, I want you to stay away from church; make some excuse, or I will for you. Write a letter for me to this address in Paris. Say,—Guy Halifax’s father will be there, without fail, within a week, to answer all demands.”

“All demands!” I echoed, bewildered.

He repeated the sentence word for word. “Can you remember it? Literally, mind! And post it at once, before we return from church.”

Here the mother’s call was heard. “John, are you coming?”

“In a moment, love,” for her hand was on the door outside; but her husband held the other handle fast. He then went on, breathlessly. “You understand, Phineas? And you will be careful—very careful? *She must not know*—not till to-night.”

“One word. Guy is alive and well?”

“Yes—yes.”

“Thank God!”

But Guy’s father was gone while I spoke. Heavy as the news might be,—this ill news which had struck me with apprehension the moment I saw Lord Ravenel,—it was still endurable. I could not conjure up any grief so bitter as the boy’s dying.

Therefore, with a quietness that came naturally under the strong compulsion of such a necessity as the present, I rejoined the rest, made my excuses, and answered all objections. I watched the marriage party leave the house. A simple procession—the mother first, leaning on Edwin; then Maud, Walter, and Lord Ravenel; John walked last, with Louise upon his arm. Thus I saw them move up the garden,

and through the beechwood, to the little church on the hill.

I then wrote the letter and sent it off. That done, I went back into the study. Knowing nothing—able to guess nothing—a dull patience came over me, the patience with which we often wait for unknown, inevitable misfortunes. Sometimes I almost forgot Guy in my startled remembrance of his father's look as he called me away, and sat down—or rather dropped down—into his chair. Was it illness? yet he had not complained; he hardly ever did complain, and scarcely had a day's sickness from year to year. And as I watched him and Louise up the garden, I had noticed his free, firm gait, without the least sign of unsteadiness or weakness. Besides, he was not one to keep any but a necessary secret from those who loved him. He could not be seriously ill, or we should have known it.

Thus I pondered, until I heard the church bells ring out merrily. The marriage was over.

I was just in time to meet them at the front gates, which they entered—our Edwin and his wife—through a living line of smiling faces,

treading upon a carpet of strewn flowers. Enderley would not be defrauded of its welcome—all the village had escorted the young couple in triumph home. I have a misty recollection of how happy everybody looked, how the sun was shining, and the bells ringing, and the people cheering—a mingled phantasmagoria of sights and sounds, in which I saw only one person distinctly,—John.

He waited while the young folk passed in—stood on the hall-steps—in a few words thanked his people, and bade them to the general rejoicing. They, uproarious, answered in loud hurrahs, and one energetic voice cried out—

“One cheer more for Master Guy!”

Guy’s mother turned delighted—her eyes shining with proud tears.

“John—thank them; tell them that Guy will thank them himself to-morrow.”

The master thanked them, but either he did not explain, or their honest rude voices drowned all mention of the latter fact—that Guy would be home to-morrow.

All this while, and at the marriage-breakfast likewise, Mr. Halifax kept the same calm de-

meanour. Once only, when the rest were all gathered round the bride and bridegroom, he said to me—

“ Phineas—is it done ?”

“ What is done ?” asked Ursula, suddenly passing.

“ A letter I asked him to write for me this morning.”

Now I had all my life been proud of John's face—that it was a safe face to trust in—that it could not, or if it could, it would not, boast that stony calm under which some men are so proud of disguising themselves and their emotions from those nearest and dearest to them. If he were sad, we knew it; if he were happy, we knew it too. It was his principle, that nothing but the strongest motive should make a man stoop to even the smallest hypocrisy.

Therefore, hearing him thus speak to his wife, I was struck with great alarm. Mrs. Halifax herself seemed uneasy.

“ A business letter, I suppose ?”

“ Partly on business. I will tell you all about it this evening.”

She looked re-assured. "Just as you like ; you know I am not curious." But passing on, she turned back. "John, if it was anything important to be done—anything that I ought to know at once, you would not keep me in ignorance?"

"No—my dearest ! No !"

In John's truthfulness both of word and look his wife always trusted ; implicitly, as she would have trusted her own soul. I also. Then what had happened must be something in which no help availed ? something altogether past and irremediable ; something which he rightly wished to keep concealed, for a few hours at least, from his other children, so as not to mar the happiness of this notable day, of which there could be no second, this crowning day of their lives—this wedding-day of Edwin and Louise.

So, he sat at the marriage-table ; he drank the marriage-health ; he kissed them both, and gave them a father's marriage-blessing. Finally, he sent them away, smiling and sorrowful—as is the bounden duty of young married couples to depart—Edwin pausing even on the carriage-

step to embrace his mother with especial tenderness, and whisper her to "give his love to Guy."

"It reminds one of Guy's leaving," said the mother, hastily brushing back the tears that would spring and roll down her smiling face. She had never, until this moment, reverted to that miserable day. "John, do you think it possible the boy can be at home to-night?"

John answered emphatically, but very softly, "No."

"Why not? My letter would reach him in full time. Lord Ravenel has been to Paris and back again since then. But—" turning full upon the young nobleman—"I think you said you had not seen Guy?"

"No."

"Did you hear anything of him?"

"I—Mrs. Halifax—"

Exceedingly distressed, almost beyond his power of self-restraint, the young man looked appealingly to John, who replied for him:

"Lord Ravenel brought me a letter from Guy this morning."

“A letter from Guy—and you never told me. How very strange!”

Still, she seemed only to think it “strange.” Some difficulty or folly, perhaps—you could see by the sudden flushing of her cheek and her quick, distrustful glance at Lord Ravenel, what she imagined it was—that the boy had confessed to his father. With an instinct of concealment—the mother’s instinct—for the moment she asked no questions.

We were all still standing at the hall-door. Unresisting, she suffered her husband to take her arm in his and bring her into the study.

“Now—the letter, please! Children, go away; I want to speak to your father.—The letter, John?”

Her hand, which she held out, shook like an aspen leaf. She tried to unfold the paper—stopped, and looked up piteously.

“It is not to tell me he is not coming home? I can bear anything, you know—but he *must* come home.”

John only answered, “Read,”—and took firm hold of her hand while she read—as we hold

the hand of one undergoing great torture,—which must be undergone, and which no human love can either prepare for, or remove, or alleviate.

The letter, which I saw afterwards, was thus :

“DEAR FATHER AND MOTHER,

“I have disgraced you all. I have been drunk—in a gaming-house. A man insulted me—it was about my father—but you will hear—all the world will hear presently. I struck him—there was something in my hand, and—the man was hurt.

“He may be dead by this time. I don’t know.

“I am away to America to-night. I shall never come home any more. God bless you all.

“GUY HALIFAX.”

“P.S. I got my mother’s letter to-day. Mother—I was not in my right senses, or I should not have done it. Mother, darling ! forget me. Don’t let me have broken your heart.”

Alas, he had broken it !

“Never come home any more !—Never come home any more !”

She repeated this over and over again, vacantly : nothing but these five words.

Nature refused to bear it ; or rather, Nature mercifully helped her, in the only way the mother could bear it. When John took his wife in his arms, she was insensible ; and remained so, with but rare intervals, for hours.

This was the end of Edwin's wedding-day.

CHAPTER VIII.

LORD RAVENEL knew—as all Paris did by this time—the whole story. Though, as he truly said, he had not seen Guy. The lad was hurried off immediately, for fear of justice ; but he had written from shipboard to Lord Ravenel, begging him himself to take the letter and break the news to us at Beechwood.

The man he had struck was not one of Lord Luxmore's set—though it was through some of his “ noble ” friends Guy had fallen into his company. He was an Englishman, lately succeeded to a baronetcy and estate ;—his name, —how we started to hear it, though by Lord Ravenel and by us for his sake, it was both pronounced and listened to, as if none of us had ever heard it before—Sir Gerard Vermilye.

As soon as Ursula recovered, Mr. Halifax

and Lord Ravenel went to Paris together. This was necessary, not only to meet justice, but to track the boy—to whose destination we had no clue but the wide word, America. Guy's mother hurried them away—his mother, who rose from her bed, and moved about the house like a ghost—up-stairs and down-stairs—everywhere—excepting in that room, which was now once more locked, and the outer blind drawn down, as if Death himself had taken possession there.

Alas ! we learned now, that there may be sorrows bitterer even than death.

Mr. Halifax went away. Then followed a long season of torpid gloom—days or weeks, I hardly remember—during which we, living shut up at Beechwood, knew that our name—John's stainless, honourable name—was in everybody's mouth—parrotted abroad in every society—cavassed in every newspaper. We tried, Walter and I, to stop them at first, dreading lest the mother might read in some foul print or other scurrilous tales about her boy ; or, as long remained doubtful, learn that he was proclaimed through France and England as a homicide—an assassin. But concealments were idle—she would

read everything—hear everything—meet everything—even those neighbours who out of curiosity or sympathy, called at Beechwood. Not many times, though ; they said they could not understand Mrs. Halifax. So after a while they all left her alone, except good little Grace Oldtower.

“Come often,” I heard her say to this girl, whom she was fond of : they had sat talking a whole morning—idly and pensively ; of little things around them, never once referring to things outside. “Come often, though the house is dull. Does it not feel strange, with Mr. Halifax away ?”

Ay, this was the change—stranger at first even than what had befallen Guy—for that long seemed a thing we could not realize ; like a story told of some other family than ours. The present tangible blank was the house with its head and master away.

Curiously enough, but from his domestic habits easily accountable, he had scarcely ever been more than a few days absent from home before. We missed him continually ; in his place at the head of the table ; in his chair by the fire ; his quick ring at the hall bell, when he came up from the mills—his step—his voice—

his laugh. The life and soul of the house seemed to have gone out of it, from the hour the father went away.

I think in the wonderful workings of things—as we know all things do work together for good—this fact was good for Ursula. It taught her that, in losing Guy, she had not lost all her blessings. It shewed her what in the passion of her mother-love she might have been tempted to forget—many mothers do—that beyond all maternal duty, is the duty that a woman owes to her husband; beyond all loves, is the love that was hers before any of them were born.

So, gradually, as every day John's letters came,—and she used to watch for them and seize them as if they had been love-letters; as every day she seemed to miss him more, and count more upon his return; referring all decisions, and all little pleasures planned for her, to the time “when your father comes home;”—hope and comfort began to dawn in the heart of the mourning mother.

And when at last John fixed the day of his coming back, I saw Ursula tying up the small

bundle of his letters—his letters, of which in all her happy life she had had so few—his wise, tender, comforting, comfortable letters.

“I hope I shall never need to have any more,” she said, half smiling—the faint smile which began to dawn in her poor face, as if she must accustom it to look bright again in time for her husband’s coming.

And when the day arrived, she put all the house in trim order, dressed herself in her prettiest gown, sat patient while Maud brushed and curled her hair—how very white it had gone of late!—and then waited, with a flush on her cheek—like that of a young girl waiting for her lover, for the sound of carriage-wheels.

All that had to be told about Guy—and it was better news than any one had hoped for—John had already told in his letters. When he came back, therefore, he was burthened with no trouble undisclosed—greeted with no anguish of fear or bitter remembrance. As he sprang out of the post-chaise, it was to find his wife standing at the door, and his home smiling for him its brightest welcome. No blessing on

earth could be like the blessing of the father's return.

John looked pale, but not paler than might have been expected. Grave, too—but it was a soft seriousness altogether free from the restlessness of keen anxiety. The first shock of this heavy misfortune was over. He had paid all his son's debts; he had, as far as was possible, saved his good name; he had made a safe home for the lad, and heard of his safely reaching it, in the New World. Nothing more was left but to cover over the inevitable grief, and hope that time would blot out the intolerable shame. That since Guy's hand was clear of blood—and since his recovery, Sir Gerard Vermilye had risen into a positive hero of society,—men's minds would gradually lose the impression of a deed committed in heat of youth, and repented of with such bitter atonement.

So the father took his old place, and looked round on the remnant of his children, grave indeed, but not weighed down by incurable suffering. Something, deeper even than the hard time he had recently passed through, seemed to have made

his home more than ever dear to him. He sat in his arm-chair, never weary of noticing everything pleasant about him, of saying how pretty Beechwood looked, and how delicious it was to be at home. And perpetually, if any chance unlinked it, his hand would return to its clasp of Ursula's ; —the minute she left her place by his side, his restless "Love, where are you going?" would call her back again. And once, when the children were out of the room, and I, sitting in a dark corner, was probably thought absent likewise, I saw John take his wife's face between his two hands, and look in it—the fondest, most lingering, saddest look !—then fold her tightly to his breast.

"I must never be away from her again. Mine—for as long as I live, mine—*my* wife, *my* Ursula !"

She took it all naturally, as she had taken every expression of his love these nine-and-twenty years. I left them, standing eye to eye, heart to heart, as if nothing in this world could ever part them.

Next morning was gay as any of our mornings used to be, for, before breakfast, came Ed-

win and Louise. And after breakfast, the father and mother and I walked up and down the garden for an hour, talking over the prospects of the young couple. Then the post came—but we had no need to watch for it now. It only brought a letter from Lord Ravenel.

John read it, somewhat more seriously than he had been used to read these letters—which the last year or so had come often enough—the boys usually contemning, and Mistress Maud vehemently defending, the delicate small handwriting, the exquisite paper, the coronetted seal and the frank in the corner. John liked to have them, and his wife also—she being not indifferent to the fact, confirmed by many other facts, that if there was one man in the world whom Lord Ravenel honoured and admired, it was John Halifax of Beechwood. But this time her pleasure was apparently damped ; and when Maud, claiming the letter as usual, spread abroad delightedly the news that “ her ” Lord Ravenel was coming shortly, I imagined this visit was not so welcome as usual, to the parents.

Yet still, as many a time before, when Mr.

Halifax closed the letter, he sighed, looked sorrowful, saying only, "Poor Lord Ravenel!"

"John," asked his wife, speaking in a whisper, for by tacit consent all public allusion to his doings at Paris was avoided in the family—"did you, by any chance, hear anything of—you know whom I mean?"

"Not one syllable."

"You inquired?" He assented. "I knew you would. She must be almost an old woman now, or perhaps she is dead. Poor Caroline!"

It was the first time for years and years that this name had been breathed in our household. Involuntarily it carried me back—perhaps others besides me—to the day at Longfield when little Guy had devoted himself to his "pretty lady;" when we first heard that other name, which by a curious conjuncture of circumstances had since become so fatally familiar, and which would henceforward be like the sound of a dead-bell in our family—Gerard Vermilye.

On Lord Ravenel's re-appearance at Beechwood—and he seemed eager and glad to come—I was tempted to wish him away. He never

crossed the threshold but his presence brought a shadow over the parents' looks—and no wonder. The young people were gay and friendly as ever; made him always welcome with us; and he rode over daily from desolate, long-uninhabited Luxmore, where, in all its desolation, he appeared so fond of abiding.

He wanted to take Maud and Walter over there one day, to see some magnificent pines that were being cut down in a wholesale massacre, leaving the grand old hall as bare as a workhouse front. But the father objected; he was clearly determined that all the hospitalities between Luxmore and Beechwood should be on the Beechwood side.

Lord Ravenel apparently perceived this. "Luxmore is not Compiégne," he said to me, with his dreary smile, half sad, half cynical. "Mr. Halifax might indulge me with the society of his children."

And as he lay on the grass—it was full summer now—watching Maud's white dress flit about under the trees, I saw, or fancied I saw, something different to any former expression

that had ever lighted up the soft languid mien of William Lord Ravenel.

“How tall that child has grown lately ! She is about nineteen, I think ?”

“Not seventeen till December.”

“Ah, so young ?—Well, it is pleasant to be young !—Dear little Maud !”

He turned on one side, hiding the sun from his eyes with those delicate ringed hands—which many a time our boys had laughed at, saying they were mere lady’s hands, fit for no work at all.

Perhaps Lord Ravenel felt the cloud that had come over our intercourse with him ; a cloud which, considering late events, was scarcely unnatural : for when evening came, his leave-taking, always a regret, seemed now as painful as his *blasé* indifference to all emotions, pleasant or unpleasant, could allow. He lingered—he hesitated—he repeated many times how glad he should be to see Beechwood again ; how all the world was to him “flat, stale, and unprofitable,” except Beechwood.

John made no special answer ; except that frank smile, not without a certain kindly satire,

under which the young nobleman's Byronic affectations generally melted away like mists in the morning. He kindled up into warmth and manliness.

"I thank you, Mr. Halifax — I thank you heartily for all you and your household have been to me. I trust I shall enjoy your friendship for many years. And if, in any way, I might offer mine, or any small influence in the world—"

"Your influence is not small," John returned earnestly. "I have often told you so. I know no man who has wider opportunities than you have."

"But I have let them slip—for ever."

"No, not for ever. You are young still ; you have half a lifetime before you."

"Have I?" And for the moment one would hardly have recognised the sallow, spiritless face, that with all the delicacy of boyhood still, at times looked so exceedingly old. "No, no, Mr. Halifax, who ever heard of a man beginning life at seven-and-thirty?"

"Are you really seven-and-thirty?" asked Maud.

"Yes—yes, my girl. Is it so very odd?"

He patted her on the shoulder, took her hand, gazed at it—the round, rosy, healthy, girlish hand—with a melancholy tenderness ;—then bade “ Good-bye ” to us all generally, and rode off.

It struck me then, though I hurried the thought away—it struck me afterwards, and does now with renewed surprise—how strange it was that the mother never noticed or took into account certain possibilities that would have occurred naturally to any worldly mother. I can only explain it by remembering the unworldliness of our lives at Beechwood, the heavy cares which now pressed upon us from without, and the notable fact—which our own family experience ought to have taught us, yet did not—that in cases like this, often those whom one would have expected to be most quick-sighted, are the most strangely, irretrievably, mournfully blind.

When, the very next day, Lord Ravenel, not on horseback but in his rarely-used luxurious coronetted carriage, drove up to Beechwood, every one in the house except myself was inconceivably astonished to see him back again.

He said that he had delayed his journey to

Paris, but gave no explanation of that delay. He joined as usual in our mid-day dinner; and after dinner, still as usual, took a walk with me and Maud. It happened to be through the beech-wood, almost the identical path that I remembered taking, years and years ago, with John and Ursula. I was surprised, and yet not surprised, to hear Lord Ravenel allude to the fact, a well-known fact in our family; for I think all fathers and mothers like to relate, and all children to hear, the slightest incidents of the parents' courting days.

"You did not know father and mother when they were young?" said Maud, catching our conversation and flashing back her innocent, merry face upon us.

"No, scarcely likely." And he smiled. "Oh, yes—it might have been—I forget, I am not a young man now. How old were Mr. and Mrs. Halifax when they married?"

"Father was twenty-one and mother was eighteen—only a year older than I." And Maud, half ashamed of this suggestive remark, ran away. Her gay candour proved to me—

perhaps to others besides me—the girl's entire free-heartedness. The frank innocence of childhood was still hers.

Lord Ravenel looked after her and sighed. "It is good to marry early; do you not think so, Mr. Fletcher?"

I told him—(I was rather sorry after I had said it, if one ought to be sorry for having, when questioned, given one's honest opinion)—I told him that I thought those happiest who found their happiness early, but that I did not see why happiness should be rejected because it was the will of Providence that it should not be found till late.

"I wonder," he said, dreamily, "I wonder whether I shall ever find it."

I asked him—it was by an impulse irresistible—why he had never married?

"Because I never found any woman either to love or to believe in. Worse," he added, bitterly, "I did not think there lived the woman who could be believed in."

We had come out of the beech-wood and were standing by the low churchyard wall;

the sun glittered on the white marble headstone on which was inscribed "Muriel Joy Halifax."

Lord Ravenel leaned over the wall, his eyes fixed upon that little grave. After a while, he said, sighing,—

"Do you know, I have thought sometimes that, had she lived, I could have loved—I might have married—that child!"

Here Maud sprang towards us. In her playful tyranny, which she loved to exercise and he to submit to, she insisted on knowing what Lord Ravenel was talking about.

"I was saying," he answered, taking both her hands and looking down into her bright, unshrinking eyes, "I was saying, how dearly I loved your sister Muriel."

"I know that," and Maud became grave at once. "I know you care for me because I am like my sister Muriel."

"If it were so, would you be sorry or glad?"

"Glad, and proud too. But you said, or you were going to say, something more. What was it?"

He hesitated long, then answered—

“ I will tell you another time.”

Maud went away rather cross and dissatisfied, but evidently suspecting nothing. For me,—I began to be seriously uneasy about her and Lord Ravenel.

Of all kinds of love, there is one which common sense and romance have often combined to hold obnoxious, improbable, or ridiculous, but which has always seemed to me the most real and pathetic form that the passion ever takes;—I mean, love in spite of great disparity of age. Even when this is on the woman's side, I can imagine circumstances that would make it far less ludicrous than pitiful; and there are few things to me more touching, more full of sad earnest, than to see an old man in love with a young girl.

Lord Ravenel's case would hardly come under this category; yet the difference between seventeen and thirty-seven was sufficient to warrant in him a trembling uncertainty, an eager catching at the skirts of that vanishing youth whose preciousness he never seemed to have recognised

till now. It was with a mournful interest that all day I watched him follow the child about, gather her posies, help her to water her flowers, and accommodate himself to those whims and fancies, of which, as the pet and the youngest, Mistress Maud had her full share.

When, at her usual hour of half-past nine, the little lady was summoned away to bed, "to keep up her roses," he looked half resentful of the mother's interference.

"Maud is not a child now; and this may be my last night—" he stopped, sensitively, at the involuntary foreboding.

"Your last night? Nonsense! you will come back soon again. You must—you shall!" said Maud, decisively.

"I hope I may;—I trust in heaven I may!"

He spoke low, holding her hand distantly and reverently, not attempting to kiss it, as in all his former farewells he had invariably done.

"Maud, remember me! However or whenever I come back, dearest child, be faithful and remember me!"

Maud fled away with a sob of childish pain—

partly anger, the mother thought—and slightly apologized to the guest for her daughter's "naughtiness."

Lord Ravenel sat silent for a long, long time.

Just when we thought he proposed leaving, he said abruptly, "Mr. Halifax, may I have five minutes' speech with you in the study?"

The five minutes extended to half an hour. Mrs. Halifax wondered what on earth they were talking about. I held my peace. At last the father came in alone.

"John, is Lord Ravenel gone?"

"Not yet."

"What could he have wanted to say to you?"

John sat down by his wife, picked up the ball of her knitting, rolled and unrolled it. She saw at once that something had grieved and perplexed him exceedingly. Her heart shrunk back—that still sore heart!—recoiled with a not unnatural fear.

"Oh, husband, is it any new misfortune?"

"No, love," cheering her with a smile; "nothing that fathers and mothers in general would consider as such. He has asked me for our Maud."

“What for?” was the mother’s first exceedingly simple question—and then she guessed its answer.

“Lord Ravenel? Impossible! Ridiculous—absolutely ridiculous! She is only a child.”

“Nevertheless, Lord Ravenel wishes to marry our little Maud.”

“Lord Ravenel wishes to marry our Maud!”

Mrs. Halifax repeated this to herself more than once, before she was able to entertain it as a reality. When she did, the first impression it made upon her mind was altogether pain.

“Oh, John! I hoped we had done with these sort of things; I thought we should have been left in peace with the rest of our children.”

John smiled again; for, indeed, there was a comical side to her view of the subject; but its serious phase soon returned; doubly so, when, looking up, they both saw Lord Ravenel standing before them. Firm his attitude was, firmer than usual; and it was with something of his father’s stately air, mingled with a more chivalric and sincerer grace, that he stooped forward and kissed the hand of Maud’s mother.

“ Mr. Halifax has told you all, I believe ?”

“ He has.”

“ May I then, with entire trust in you both, await my answer ?”

He waited it, patiently enough, with little apparent doubt as to what it would be. Besides, it was only the question of parental consent, not the vital question of Maud's preference. And, with all his natural humility, Lord Ravenel's might be forgiven if, brought up in the world, he was aware of his position therein ;—nor quite unconscious that it was not merely William Ravenel but the only son and heir of the Earl of Luxmore, who came a wooing.

Not till after a long pause, and even a whispered word or two between the husband and wife, who knew each other's minds so well that no more consultation was needed—did the suitor again, with a more formal air, ask for an answer.

“ It is difficult to give. I find that my wife, like myself, had no idea of your feelings. The extreme suddenness—”

“ Pardon me ; my intention has not been sudden. It is the growth of many months — years I might almost say.”

“ We are the more grieved.”

“ Grieved ?”

Lord Ravenel’s extreme surprise startled him from the mere suitor into the lover ; he glanced from one to the other in undisguised alarm. John hesitated ; the mother said something about the “ great difference between them.”

“ In age, do you mean ? I am aware of that,” he answered, with some sadness. “ But twenty years is not an insuperable bar in marriage.”

“ No,” said Mrs. Halifax, thoughtfully.

“ And for any other disparity—in fortune—or rank—”

“ I think, Lord Ravenel,”—and the mother spoke with her ‘ dignified ’ air—“ you know enough of my husband’s character and opinions to be assured how lightly he would hold such a disparity—if you allude to that supposed to exist between the son of the Earl of Luxmore and the daughter of John Halifax.”

The young nobleman coloured, as with ingenuous shame at what he had been implying. “ I am glad of it. Let me assure you there will be no impediments on the side of my family.

The earl has long wished me to marry. He knows well enough that I can marry whom I please—and shall marry for love only. Give me your leave to win your little Maud.”

A dead silence.

“Again pardon me,” Lord Ravenel said with some hauteur ; “I cannot have clearly explained myself. Let me repeat, Mr. Halifax, that I ask your permission to win your daughter’s affection, and, in due time, her hand.”

“I would you had asked of me anything that it could be less impossible to give you.”

“Impossible? What do you mean?—Mrs. Halifax—” He turned instinctively to the woman—the mother.

Ursula’s eyes were full of a sad kindness—the kindness any mother must feel towards one who worthily woos her daughter—but she replied distinctly—

“I feel, with my husband, that such a marriage would be impossible.”

Lord Ravenel grew scarlet—sat down—rose again, and stood facing them, pale and haughty.

“If I may ask—your reasons?”

"Since you ask—certainly," John replied. "Though, believe me, I give them with the deepest pain. Lord Ravenel, do you not yourself see that our Maud—"

"Wait one moment," he interrupted. "There is not, there cannot be, any previous attachment?"

The supposition made the parents smile. "Indeed, nothing of the kind: she is a mere child."

"You think her too young for marriage, then?" was the eager answer. "Be it so. I will wait, though my youth, alas! is slipping from me; but I will wait—two years, three—any time you choose to name."

John needed not to reply. The very sorrow of his decision showed how inevitable and irrevocable it was.

Lord Ravenel's pride rose against it.

"I fear in this my novel position I am somewhat slow of comprehension. Would it be so great a misfortune to your daughter if I made her Viscountess Ravenel, and in course of time Countess of Luxmore?"

"I believe it would. Her mother and I would

rather see our little Maud lying beside her sister Muriel, than see her Countess of Luxmore."

These words, hard as they were, John uttered so softly and with such infinite grief and pain, that they struck the young man, not with anger, but with an indefinite awe, as if a ghost from his youth—his wasted youth—had risen up to point out their truth, and show him that what seemed insult or vengeance was only a bitter necessity.

All he did was to repeat, in a subdued manner—"Your reasons?"

"Ah, Lord Ravenel!" John answered sadly, "do you not see yourself that the distance between us and you is wide as the poles? Not in worldly things, but in things far deeper;—personal things, which strike at the root of love, home—nay, honour."

Lord Ravenel started. "Would you imply that anything in my past life, aimless and useless as it may have been, is unworthy of my honour—the honour of our house?"

Saying this, he stopped—recoiled—as if suddenly made aware by the very words himself had uttered, what—contrasted with the unsullied

dignity of the tradesman's life, the spotless innocence of the tradesman's daughter—what a foul tattered rag, fit to be torn down by any honest gust, was that flaunting emblazonment, the so-called “honour” of Luxmore !

“I understand you now. ‘The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children,’ as your Bible says—your Bible, that I had half begun to believe in.—Be it so. Mr. Halifax, I will detain you no longer.”

John intercepted the young man's departure.

“No, you do *not* understand me. I hold no man accountable for any errors, any shortcomings, except his own.”

“I am to conclude, then, that it is to myself you refuse your daughter?”

“It is.”

Lord Ravenel once more bowed, with sarcastic emphasis.

“I entreat you not to mistake me,” John continued, most earnestly. “I know nothing of you that the world would condemn, much that it would even admire ; but your world is not our world, nor your aims our aims. If I

gave you my little Maud, it would confer on you no lasting happiness, and it would be thrusting my child, my own flesh and blood, to the brink of that whirlpool where, soon or late, every miserable life must go down."

Lord Ravenel made no answer. His new-born energy, his pride, his sarcasm, had successively vanished; dead, passive melancholy resumed its empire over him. Mr. Halifax regarded him with mournful compassion.

"O that I had foreseen this! I would have placed the breadth of all England between you and my child."

"Would you?"

"Understand me. Not because you do not possess our warm interest, our friendship; both will always be yours. But these are external ties, which may exist through many differences. In marriage there must be perfect unity;—one aim, one faith, one love, or the marriage is incomplete, unholy—a mere civil contract and no more."

Lord Ravenel looked up amazed at this doctrine, then sat awhile, pondering drearily.

"Yes, you may be right," at last he said.

“Your Maud is not for me, nor those like me. Between us and you is that ‘great gulf fixed;’—what did the old fable say? I forget.—*Che sarà, sarà!* I am but as others: I am but what I was born to be.”

“Do you recognize what you were born to be? Not only a nobleman, but a gentleman; not only a gentleman, but a man—man, made in the image of God. How can you, how dare you, give the lie to your Creator?”

“What has He given me? What have I to thank him for?”

“First, manhood; the manhood His Son disdained not to wear; worldly gifts, such as rank, riches, influence, many things which others have to spend half their existence in earning; life in its best prime, with much of youth yet remaining—with grief endured, wisdom learnt, experience won. Would to Heaven that by any poor word of mine I could make you feel all that you are—all that you might be!”

A gleam, bright as a boy's hope, wild as a boy's daring, flashed from those listless eyes—then faded.

“You mean, Mr. Halifax, what I might have been. Now, it is too late.”

“There is no such word as ‘too late,’ in the wide world—nay, not in the universe. What, shall we whose atom of time is but a fragment out of an ever-present eternity—shall we, so long as we live, or even at our life’s ending, dare to cry out to the Eternal One, ‘It is too late?’ ”

As John spoke, in much more excitement than was usual to him, a sudden flush or rather spasm of colour flushed his face, then faded away, leaving him pallid to the very lips. He sat down hastily, in his frequent attitude, with the left arm pressed across the breast.

“Lord Ravenel.”—His voice was faint, as though speech was painful to him.

The other looked up, the old look of reverent attention, which I remembered in the boy-lord who came to see us at Norton-Bury; in the young ‘Anselmo’ whose enthusiastic hero-worship had fixed itself, with an almost un-reasoning trust, on Muriel’s father.

“ Lord Ravenel, forgive anything I have said that may have hurt you. It would grieve me inexpressibly if we did not part as friends.”

“ Part ?”

“ For a time, we must. I dare not risk further either your happiness or my child’s.”

“ No ; not hers. Guard it. I blame you not. The lovely innocent child ! God forbid she should ever have a life like mine.”

He sat silent—his clasped hands listlessly dropping — his countenance dreamy — yet, it seemed to me, less hopelessly sad : then with a sudden effort he rose.

“ I must go now.”

Crossing over to Mrs. Halifax, he thanked her, with much emotion, for all her kindness.

“ For your husband, I owe him more than kindness, as perhaps I may prove some day. If not, try to believe the best of me you can. Good-bye.”

They both said good-bye, and bade God bless him ; with scarcely less tenderness than if things had ended as he desired, and instead of this farewell, sad and indefinite beyond most

farewells, they were giving the parental welcome to a newly-adopted son.

Ere finally quitting us, Lord Ravenel turned back to speak to John once more, hesitatingly and mournfully.

“ If, she—if the child should ask or wonder about my absence — she likes me in her innocent way you know—if so, you will tell her—What shall you tell her ?”

“ Nothing. It is best not.”

“ Ay, it is, it is.”

He shook hands with us all three, without saying anything else ; then the carriage rolled away, and we saw his face—that pale, gentle, melancholy face—no more.

It was years and years before any one beyond ourselves knew what a near escape our little Maud had had of becoming Viscountess Ravenel—future Countess of Luxmore.

CHAPTER IX.

It was not many weeks after this departure of Lord Ravenel's—the pain of which was almost forgotten in the comfort of Guy's first long home letter, which came about this time—that John one morning, suddenly dropping his newspaper, exclaimed,

“Lord Luxmore is dead.”

Yes, he had returned to his dust, this old bad man ; so old, that people had begun to think he would never die. He was gone ; the man who, if we owned an enemy in the world, had certainly proved himself that enemy. Something peculiar is there in a decease like this—of one whom, living, we have almost felt ourselves justified in condemning, avoiding — perhaps hating. Until Death stepping in between, re-

moves him to another tribunal than this petty justice of ours, and laying a solemn finger on our mouths, forbids us either to think or utter a word of hatred against that which is now—what?—a disembodied spirit, or a handful of miserable, corrupting clay.

Lord Luxmore was dead. He had gone to his account; it was not ours to judge him. We never knew—I believe no one except his son ever fully knew—the history of his deathbed.

John sat in silence, the paper before him, long after we had passed the news and discussed it, not without awe, all round the breakfast-table.

Maud stole up—hesitatingly, and asked to see the announcement of the Earl's decease.

“No, my child; but you shall hear it read aloud, if you choose.”

I guessed the reason of his refusal; when, looking over him as he read, I saw, after the long list of titles owned by the new Earl of Luxmore, one bitter line; how it must have cut to the heart of him whom we first heard of as “poor William!”

“*Had likewise issue, Caroline, married in*

17—, to *Richard Brithwood, Esquire, afterwards divorced.*”

And by a curious coincidence, about twenty lines further down I read among the fashionable marriages—

“*At the British Embassy, Paris, Sir Gerard Vermilye, Bart., to the youthful and beautiful daughter of——*”

I forget who. I only saw that the name was not her name, of whom the “youthful and beautiful” bride had most likely never heard. He had not married Lady Caroline.

This morning’s intelligence brought the Luxmore family so much to our thoughts, that driving out after breakfast, John and I involuntarily recurred to the subject. Nay, talking on, in the solitude of our front seat—for Mrs. Halifax, Miss Halifax, and Mrs. Edwin Halifax, in the carriage behind, were deep in some other subject—we fell upon a topic which by tacit consent had been laid aside, as in our household we held it good to lay aside, any inevitable regret.

“Poor Maud! how eager she was to hear

the news to-day. She little thinks how vitally it might have concerned her."

"No," John answered thoughtfully; then asked me with some abruptness: "Why did you say 'poor Maud?'"

I really could not tell; it was a mere accident, the unwitting indication of some crotchets of mine, which had often come into my mind lately. Crotchets, perhaps peculiar to one, who, never having known a certain possession, found himself rather prone to over-rate its value. But it sometimes struck me as hard, considering how little honest and sincere love there is in the world, that Maud should never have known of Lord Ravenel's.

Possibly, against my will, my answer implied something of this; for John was a long time silent. Then he began to talk of various matters; telling me of many improvements he was planning and executing, on his property, and among his people. In all his plans, and in the carrying-out of them, I noticed one peculiarity, strong in him throughout his life, but latterly grown stronger than ever—namely, that whatever he found to

do, he did immediately. Procrastination had never been one of his faults ; now, he seemed to have a horror of putting anything off even for a single hour. Nothing that could be done, did he lay aside until it was done ; his business affairs were kept in perfect order ; each day's work being completed with the day. And in the thousand-and-one little things that were constantly arising, from his position as magistrate and land-holder and his general interest in the movements of the time, the same system was invariably pursued. In his relations with the world outside, as in his own little valley, he seemed determined to "work while it was day." If he could possibly avoid it, no application was ever unattended to ; no duty left unfinished ; no good unacknowledged ; no evil unremedied, or at least unforgiven.

"John," I said, as to-day this peculiarity of his struck me more than usual ; "thou art certainly one of the faithful servants whom the Master when He cometh will find watching."

"I hope so. It ought to be thus with all men—but especially with me."

I imagined, from his tone, that he was thinking of his responsibility as father, master, owner of large wealth. How could I know — how could I guess — beyond this !

“ Do you think she looks pale, Phineas ?” he asked suddenly.

“ Who—your wife ?”

“ No—Maud. My little Maud.”

It was but lately that he had called her “his” little Maud ; since with that extreme tenacity of attachment which was a part of his nature—refusing to put any one love in another love’s place—his second daughter had never been to him like the first. Now, however, I had noticed that he took Maud nearer to his heart, made her more often his companion, watched her with a sedulous tenderness—it was easy to guess why.

“ She may have looked a little paler of late, a little more thoughtful. But I am sure she is not unhappy.”

“ I believe not—thank God !”

“ Surely,” I said, anxiously, “ you have never repented what you did about Lord Ravenel ?”

“ No—not once. It cost me so much, that I know it was right to be done.”

“But if things had been otherwise—if you had not been so sure of Maud’s feelings—”

He started, painfully ; then answered—“I think I should have done it still.”

I was silent. The paramount right, the high prerogative of Love, which he held as strongly as I did, seemed attacked in its liberty divine. For the moment, it was as if he too had in his middle age gone over to the cold-blooded ranks of harsh parental prudence, despotic paternal rule ; as if Ursula March’s lover and Maud’s father were two distinct beings. One finds it so, often enough, with men.

“John,” I said, “could you have done it ? could you have broken the child’s heart ?”

“Yes, if it was to save her peace—perhaps her soul, I *could* have broken my child’s heart.”

He spoke solemnly, with an accent of inexpressible pain, as if this were not the first time by many that he had pondered over such a possibility.

“I wish, Phineas, to make clear to you, in case of—of any future misconceptions—my mind on this matter. One right alone I hold superior to the right of love,—duty. It is a father’s duty, at all risks, at all costs, to save his child

from anything which he believes would peril *her* duty—so long as she is too young to understand fully how beyond the claim of any human being, be it father or lover, is God's claim to herself and her immortal soul. Anything which would endanger that, should be cut off—though it be the right hand—the right eye. But, thank God, it was not thus with my little Maud.”

“Nor with him either. He bore his disappointment well.”

“Nobly. It may make a true nobleman of him yet. But, being what he is, and for as long as he remains so, he must not be trusted with my little Maud. I must take care of her while I live : afterwards—”

His smile faded, or rather was transmuted into that grave thoughtfulness which I had lately noticed in him, when, as now, he fell into one of his long silences. There was nothing sad about it ; rather a serenity which reminded me of that sweet look of his boyhood, which had vanished during the manifold cares of his middle life. The expression of the mouth, as I saw it in profile—close and calm—almost inclined me to go back

to the fanciful follies of our youth, and call him "David."

We drove through Norton Bury, and left Mrs. Edwin there. Then on, along the familiar road, towards the Manor-house: past the white gate, within sight of little Longfield.

"It looks just the same—the tenant takes good care of it." And John's eyes turned fondly to his old home.

"Ay, just the same. Do you know, your wife was saying to me this morning, that when Guy comes back, when all the young folk are married, and you retire from business and settle in the *otium cum dignitate*, the learned leisure you used to plan—she would like to give up Beechwood. She said, she hopes you and she will end your days together at little Longfield."

"Did she? Yes, I know that has been always her dream."

"Scarcely a dream, or one that is not unlikely to be fulfilled. I like to fancy you both two old people, sitting on either side the fire—or on the same side, if you like best; very cheerful—you will make such a merry old man,

John, with all your children round you, and indefinite grandchildren—about the house continually. Or else you two will sit alone together, just as in your early married days—you and your old wife—the dearest and handsomest old lady that ever was seen.”

“ Phineas—don’t—don’t.” I was startled by the tone in which he answered the lightness of mine. “ I mean—don’t be planning out the future. It is foolish—it is almost wrong. God’s will is not as our will ; and He knows best.”

I would have spoken ; but just then we reached the Manor-house gate, and plunged at once into present life, and into the hospitable circle of the Oldtowers.

They were all in the excitement of a wonderful piece of gossip : gossip so strange, so sudden, so unprecedented, that it absorbed all lesser matters. It burst out before we had been in the house five minutes.

“ Have you heard this extraordinary report about the Luxmore family ?”

I could see Maud turn with eager attention—fixing her eyes wistfully on Lady Oldtower.

“About the Earl’s death? Yes, we saw it in the newspaper.” And John passed on to some other point of conversation. In vain.

“This news relates to the present Earl. I never heard of such a thing—never. In fact, if true, his conduct is something which in its self-denial approaches absolute insanity. Is it possible that, being so great a friend of your family, he has not informed you of the circumstances?”

These circumstances, with some patience, we extracted from the voluble Lady Oldtower. She had learnt them—I forget how: but ill news never wants a tongue to carry it.

It seemed that on the Earl’s death it was discovered, what had already been long suspected, that his liabilities, like his extravagances, were enormous. That he was obliged to live abroad, to escape in some degree the clamorous haunting of the hundreds he had ruined: poor tradespeople—who knew that their only chance of payment was in the old man’s lifetime—for his whole property was entailed on the son.

Whether Lord Ravenel had ever been acquainted with this state of things, or whether,

being in ignorance of it, his own style of living had in degree imitated his father's, rumour did not say, nor indeed was it of much consequence. The facts subsequently becoming known immediately after Lord Luxmore's death, made all former conjectures unnecessary.

Not a week before he died, the late Earl and his son—chiefly it was believed on the latter's instigation—had cut off the entail, thereby making the whole property saleable, and available for the payment of creditors. Thus by his own act, and—as some one had told somebody that somebody else had heard Lord Ravenel say—"for the honour of the family," the present Earl had succeeded to an empty title, and—beggary.

"Or," Lady Oldtower added, "what to a man of rank will be the same as beggary—a paltry two hundred a-year or so—which he has reserved, they say, just to keep him from destitution. Ah—here comes Mr. Jessop; I thought he would. He can tell us all about it."

Old Mr. Jessop was as much excited as any one present.

“Ay—it’s all true—only too true, Mr. Halifax. He was at my house last night.”

“Last night!” I do not think anybody caught the child’s exclamation but me; I could not help watching little Maud, noticing what strong emotion, still perfectly child-like and unguarded in its demonstration, was shaking her innocent bosom, and overflowing at her eyes. However, as she sat still in her corner, nobody observed her.

“Yes, he slept at my house—Lord Ravenel, the Earl of Luxmore I mean. Much good will his title do him! My head clerk is better off than he. He has stripped himself of every penny, except—bless me, I forget;—Mr. Halifax, he gave me a letter for you.”

John walked to the window, to read it; but having read it, passed it openly round the circle; as indeed was best.

“MY DEAR FRIEND,

“You will have heard that my father is no more.”

(“He used always to say ‘the Earl,’” whispered Maud, as she looked over my shoulder.)

“ I write this merely to say, what I feel sure you will already have believed—that anything which you may learn concerning his affairs, I was myself unaware of, except in a very slight degree, when I last visited Beechwood.

“ Will you likewise believe that in all I have done or intend doing, your interests as my tenant—which I hope you will remain—have been, and shall be, sedulously guarded ?

“ My grateful remembrance to all your household.

“ Faithfully yours, and theirs,

“ LUXMORE.”

“ Give me back the letter, Maud my child.”

She had been taking possession of it, as in right of being his “ pet ” she generally did of all Lord Ravenel’s letters. But now, without a word of objection, she surrendered it to her father.

“ What does he mean, Mr. Jessop, about my interests as his tenant ?”

“ Bless me—I am so grieved about the matter, that everything goes astray in my head. He wished me to explain to you, that he has reserved

one portion of the Luxmore property intact—Enderley mills. The rent you pay will, he says, be a sufficient income for him ; and then while your lease lasts no other landlord can injure you. Very thoughtful of him—very thoughtful indeed, Mr. Halifax.”

John made no answer.

“ I never saw a man so altered. He went over some matters with me—private charities, in which I have been his agent, you know—grave, clear-headed, business-like — my clerk himself could not have done better. Afterwards we sat and talked, and I tried—foolishly enough, when the thing was done !—to show him what a frantic act it was both towards himself and his heirs. But he could not see it. He said, cutting off the entail would harm nobody—for that he did not intend ever to marry. Poor fellow !”

“ Is he with you still ?” John asked, in a low tone.

“ No ; he left this morning—for Paris—his father is to be buried there. Afterwards, he said, his movements were quite uncertain. He bade me good-bye—I—I didn’t like it, I can assure you.”

And the old man, blowing his nose with his yellow pocket-handkerchief, and twitching his features into all manner of shapes, seemed determined to put aside the melancholy subject, and dilated on the earl and his affairs no more.

Nor did any one. Something in this young nobleman's noble act—it has since been not without a parallel among our aristocracy—silenced the tongue of gossip itself. The deed was so new—so unlike anything that had been conceived possible, especially in a man like Lord Ravenel, who had always borne the character of a harmless, idle, misanthropic nonentity—that society was really nonplussed concerning it. Of the many loquacious visitors who came that morning to pour upon Lady Oldtower all the curiosity of Coltham—fashionable Coltham—famous for all the scandal of *haut ton*,—there was none who did not speak of Lord Luxmore and his affairs with an uncomfortable, wondering awe. Some suggested he was going mad—others, raking up stories current of his early youth, thought he had turned Catholic again, and was about to enter a monastery. One or two

honest hearts protested that he was a noble fellow, and it was a pity he had determined to be the last of the Luxmores.

For ourselves—Mr. and Mrs. Halifax, Maud and I—we never spoke to one another on the subject all morning. Not until after luncheon, when John and I had somehow stolen out of the way of the visitors, and were walking to and fro in the garden. The sunny fruit garden—ancient, Dutch, and square—with its barricade of a high hedge, a stone wall, and between it and the house a shining fence of great laurel trees.

Maud appeared suddenly before us from among these laurels, breathless.

“I got away after you, father. I—I wanted to find some strawberries—and—I wanted to speak to you.”

“Speak on, little lady.”

He linked her arm in his, and she paced between us up and down the broad walk—but without diverging to the strawberry beds. She was very grave, and paler than ordinary. Her father asked if she were tired?

“No, but my head aches. Those Coltham

people do talk so. Father, I want you to explain to me, for I can't well understand it, all this that they have been saying about Lord Ravenel."

John explained ; as simply and briefly as he could.

"I understand. Then, though he is Earl of Luxmore, he is quite poor—poorer than any of us ? And he has made himself poor, in order to pay his own and his father's debts, and keep other people from suffering from any fault of his ? Is it so ?"

"Yes, my child."

"Is it not a very noble act, father ?"

"Very noble."

"I think it is the noblest act I ever heard of. I should like to tell him so. When is he coming to Beechwood ?"

Maud spoke quickly, with flushed cheeks, in the impetuous manner she inherited from her mother. Her question not being immediately answered, she repeated it still more eagerly.

Her father replied—"I do not know."

"How very strange ! I thought he would come at once—to-night, probably."

I reminded her that Lord Ravenel had left for Paris, bidding good-bye to Mr. Jessop.

“He ought to have come to us instead of to Mr. Jessop. Write and tell him so, father. Tell him how glad we shall be to see him. And perhaps you can help him: you who help everybody. He always said you were his best friend.”

“Did he?”

“Ah now, do write, father dear—I am sure you will.”

John looked down on the little maid who hung on his arm so persuasively—then looked sorrowfully away.

“My child—I cannot.”

“What, not write to him? When he is poor and in trouble? That is not like you, father,” and Maud half-loosed her arm.

Her father quietly put the little rebellious hand back again to its place. He was evidently debating within himself whether he should tell her the truth, or how much of it. Not that the debate was new, for he must already have foreseen this possible, nay, certain, conjuncture. Especially as all his dealings with his family

had hitherto been open as daylight. He held that to prevaricate, or wilfully to give the impression of a falsehood, is almost as mean as a direct lie. When anything occurred that he could not tell his children, he always said plainly, "I cannot tell you ;" and they asked no more.

I wondered exceedingly how he would deal with Maud.

She walked with him, submissive yet not satisfied, glancing at him from time to time, waiting for him to speak. At last she could wait no longer.

"I am sure there is something wrong. You do not care for Lord Ravenel as much as you used to do."

"More, if possible."

"Then write to him. Say, we want to see him—I want to see him. Ask him to come and stay a long while at Beechwood."

"I cannot, Maud. It would be impossible for him to come. I do not think he is likely to visit Beechwood for some time."

"How long? Six months? A year, perhaps?"

"It may be several years."

"Then, I was right. Something *has* happened ;—you are not friends with him any longer. And he is poor—in trouble—oh, father !"

She snatched her hand away, and flashed upon him reproachful eyes. John took her gently by the arm, and placed her, sitting, upon the wall of a little stone bridge, under which the moat slipped with a quiet murmur. Maud's tears dropped into it, fast and free.

That very outburst, brief and thundery as a child's passion, gave consolation both to her father and me. When it lessened, John spoke.

"Now, has my little Maud ceased to be angry with her father?"

"I did not mean to be angry—only I was so startled—so grieved. Tell me what has happened, please father?"

"I will tell you—so far as I can. Lord Ravenel and myself had some conversation, of a very painful kind, the last night he was with us. After it, we both considered it advisable he should not visit us again for the present."

"Why not? Had you quarrelled? or if you

had, I thought my father was always the first to forgive everybody."

"No, Maud, we had not quarrelled."

"Then, what was it?"

"My child, you must not ask, for indeed I cannot tell you."

Maud sprang up—the rebellious spirit flashing out again. "Not tell me—me, his pet—me, that cared for him more than any of you did. I think you ought to tell me, father."

"You must allow me to decide that, if you please."

After this answer Maud paused, and said humbly, "Does any one else know?"

"Your mother, and your uncle Phineas, who were present at the time. No one else: and no one else shall know."

John spoke with that slight quivering and blueness of the lips which any mental excitement usually produced in him. He sat down by his daughter's side and took her hand.

"I knew this would grieve you, and I kept it from you as long as I could. Now you must only be patient, and like a good child, trust your father."

Something in his manner quieted her. She

only sighed and said, "She could not understand it."

"Neither can I—oftentimes, my poor little Maud. There are so many sad things in life that we have to take upon trust, and bear, and be patient with—yet never understand. I suppose we shall, some day."

His eyes wandered upward to the wide-arched blue sky, which in its calm beauty makes us fancy that Paradise is there, even though we know that "*the kingdom of Heaven is within us*," and that the kingdom of spirits may be around us and about us, everywhere.

Maud looked at her father, and crept closer to him—into his arms.

"I did not mean to be naughty. I will try not to mind losing him. But I liked Lord Ravenel so much—and he was so fond of me."

"Child" — and her father himself could not help smiling at the simplicity of her speech—"it is often easiest to lose those we are fond of and who are fond of us, because, in one sense, we never can really lose them. Nothing, either in this world, or, I believe, in any other, can part those who truly love."

I think he was hardly aware how much he was implying, at least not in its relation to her, else he would not have said it. And he would surely have noticed, as I did, that the word "love," which had not been mentioned before—it was "liking," "fond of," "care for," or some such round-about, childish phrase—the word "love" made Maud start. She darted from one to the other of us a keen glance of inquiry, and then turned the colour of a July rose.

The little lady dropped her eyes. Her attitude, her blushes, the shy tremble about her mouth, reminded me vividly, painfully, of her mother twenty-eight years ago.

Alarmed, I tried to hasten the end of our conversation, lest, voluntarily or involuntarily, it might bring on the very results which, though they might not have altered John's determination, would almost have broken his heart.

So, begging her to "kiss and make friends," which Maud did, timidly, and without attempting further questions, I hurried the father and daughter into the house; deferring for mature consideration, the question whether or not I

should trouble John with any too-anxious doubts of mine.

As we drove back through Norton Bury, I saw that while her mother and Lady Oldtower conversed, Maud sat opposite, rather more silent than her wont ; but when the ladies dismounted for shopping, she was again the lively, independent Miss Halifax,

——“ Standing with reluctant feet,
Where womanhood and childhood meet ;”

and assuming at once the prerogatives and immunities of both.

Her girlish ladyship at last got tired of silks and ribbons, and stood with me at the shop-door, amusing herself with commenting on the passers-by.

These were not so plentiful as I once remembered, though still the old town wore its old face — kinder and fairer than ever as I myself grew older. The same Coltham coach stopped at the Lamb Inn, and the same group of idle loungers took an interest in its disembodying of its contents. But railways had done an ill turn to the coach and to poor Norton Bury : where

there used to be six inside passengers, to-day was turned out only one.

“What a queer-looking little woman! Uncle Phineas, people shouldn’t dress so fine as that when they are old.”

Maud’s criticism was scarcely unjust. The light-coloured, flimsy gown, shorter than even Coltham fashionables would have esteemed decent, the Frenchified bonnet, the abundance of flaunting curls—no wonder that the stranger attracted considerable notice in quiet Norton Bury. As she tripped mincingly along, in her silk stockings and light shoes, a smothered jeer arose.

“People should not laugh at an old woman, however conceited she may be,” said Maud, indignantly.

“Is she old?”

“Just look.”

And surely when, as she turned from side to side, I caught her full face—what a face it was! withered, thin, sallow almost to deathliness, with a bright rouge-spot on each cheek, a broad smile on the ghastly mouth.

“Is she crazy, Uncle Phineas?”

“May be. Do not look at her.” For I was sure this must be the wreck of such a life as womanhood does sometimes sink to—a life, the mere knowledge of which had never yet entered our Maud’s pure world.

She seemed surprised, but obeyed me and went in. I stood at the shop-door, watching the increasing crowd, and pitying, with that pity mixed with shame that every honest man must feel towards a degraded woman, the wretched object of their jeers. Half-frightened, she still kept up that set smile, skipping daintily from side to side of the pavement, darting at and peering into every carriage that passed. Miserable creature as she looked, there was a certain grace and ease in her movements, as if she had fallen from some far higher estate.

At the moment, the Mythe carriage, with Mr. Brithwood in it, dozing his daily drive away, his gouty foot propped up before him—slowly lumbered up the street. The woman made a dart at it, but was held back.

“Canaille! I always hated your Norton Bury! Call my carriage. I will go home.”

Through its coarse discordance, its insane

rage, I thought I knew the voice. Especially when, assuming a tone of command, she addressed the old coachman :

“ Draw up, Peter ; you are very late. People, give way ! Don’t you see my carriage ? ”

There was a roar of laughter, so loud that even Mr. Brithwood opened his dull, drunken eyes and stared about him.

“ Canaille ! ”—and the scream was more of terror than anger, as she almost flung herself under the horses’ heads in her eagerness to escape from the mob. “ Let me go ! My carriage is waiting. I am Lady Caroline Brithwood ! ”

The ’squire heard her. For a single instant they gazed at one another—besotted husband, dishonoured, divorced wife—gazed with horror and fear, as two sinners who had been each other’s undoing, might meet in the poetic torments of Dante’s “ *Inferno*,” or the tangible fire and brimstone of many a blind but honest Christian’s hell. One single instant,—and then Richard Brithwood made up his mind.

“ Coachman, drive on ! ”

But the man—he was an old man—seemed

to hesitate at urging his horses right over "my lady." He even looked down on her with a sort of compassion—I remembered having heard say that she was always kind and affable to her servants.

"Drive on, you fool! Here"—and Mr. Brithwood threw some coin amongst the mob—"Fetch the constable—some of you; take the woman to the watch-house!"

And the carriage rolled on, leaving her there, crouched on the curbstone, gazing after it with something between a laugh and a moan.

Nobody touched her. Perhaps some had heard of her; a few might even have seen her—driving through Norton Bury in her state and glory, as the young 'squire's handsome wife—the charming Lady Caroline.

I was so absorbed in the sickening sight, that I did not perceive how John and Ursula, standing behind me, had seen it likewise—evidently seen and understood it all.

"What is to be done?" she whispered to him.

"What ought we to do?"

Here Maud came running out to see what was amiss in the street.

“Go in, child,” said Mrs. Halifax, sharply.
“Stay till I fetch you.”

Lady Oldtower also advanced to the door ; but catching some notion of what the disturbance was, shocked and scandalized, retired into the shop again.

John looked earnestly at his wife, but for once she did not or would not understand his meaning ; she drew back uneasily.

“What must be done?—I mean, what do you want me to do?”

“What only a woman can do—a woman like you, and in your position.”

“Yes, if it were only myself. But think of the household—think of Maud. People will talk so. It is hard to know how to act.”

“Nay ; how did One act—how would He act now, if He stood in the street this day ? If we take care of aught of His, will he not take care of us and of our children?”

Mrs. Halifax paused, thought a moment, hesitated—yielded.

“John, you are right ; you are always right. I will do anything you please.”

And then I saw, through the astonished crowd, in face of scores of window-gazers, all of whom knew them, and a great number of whom they also knew, Mr. Halifax and his wife walk up to where the miserable woman lay.

John touched her lightly on the shoulder—she screamed and cowered down.

“Are you the constable? He said he would send the constable.”

“Hush !—do not be afraid. Cousin—Cousin Caroline.”

God knows how long it was since any woman had spoken to her in that tone. It seemed to startle back her shattered wits. She rose to her feet, smiling airily.

“Madam, you are very kind. I believe I have had the pleasure of seeing you somewhere. Your name is——”

“Ursula Halifax. Do you remember?”—speaking gently, as she would have done to a child.

Lady Caroline bowed—a ghastly mockery of her former sprightly grace. “Not exactly ; but I dare say I shall presently—*au revoir*, madame !”

She was going away, kissing her hand—that yellow, wrinkled, old woman’s hand,—but John stopped her.

“My wife wants to speak to you, Lady Caroline. She wishes you to come home with us.”

“*Plait il ?*—oh yes ; I understand. I shall be happy—most happy.”

John offered her his arm with an air of grave deference ; Mrs. Halifax supported her on the other side. Without more ado, they put her in the carriage and drove home, leaving Maud in my charge, and leaving astounded Norton Bury to think and say—exactly what it pleased.

CHAPTER X.

FOR nearly three years Lady Caroline lived in our house—if that miserable existence of hers could be called living—bed-ridden, fallen into second childhood :

“ Pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw ;”

oblivious to both past and present, recognising none of us, and taking no notice of anybody, except now and then of Edwin’s little daughter, baby Louise.

We knew that all our neighbours talked us over, making far more than a nine days’ wonder of the “ very extraordinary conduct” of Mr. and Mrs. Halifax. That even good Lady Oldtower hesitated a little before she suffered her tribe of fair daughters to visit under the same roof where lay, quite out of the way, that poor wreck of

womanhood, which would hardly have tainted any woman now. But in process of time the gossip ceased of itself; and when, one summer day, a small decent funeral moved out of our garden gate to Enderley churchyard, all the comment was—

“Oh! is she dead?—What a relief it must be! How very kind of Mr. and Mrs. Halifax!”

Yes, she was dead, and had “made no sign,” either of repentance, grief, or gratitude. Unless one could consider as such a moment’s lightening before death, which Maud declared she saw in her — Maud, who had tended her with a devotedness which neither father nor mother forbade, believing that a woman cannot too soon learn womanhood’s best “mission”—usefulness, tenderness, and charity. Miss Halifax was certain that a few minutes before the last minute, she saw a gleam of sense in the filmy eyes, and stooping down, had caught some feeble murmur about “William—poor William!”

She did not tell me this; she spoke of it to no one but her mother, and to her briefly. So the wretched life once beautiful and loveful,

was now ended, or perhaps born into some new sphere to begin again its struggle after the highest beauty, the only perfect love. What are we that we should place limits to the infinite mercy of the Lord and Giver of Life, unto whom all life returns ?

We buried her and left her ;—poor Lady Caroline !

No one interfered with us, and we appealed to no one. In truth, there was no one unto whom we could appeal. Lord Luxmore, immediately after his father's funeral, had disappeared, whither, no one knew except his solicitor ; who treated with the host of creditors, paying them, we understood, to the uttermost farthing, and into whose hands the sole debtor, John Halifax, paid his yearly rent. Therewith, he wrote several times to Lord Luxmore ; but the letters were simply acknowledged through the lawyer : never answered. Whether in any of them John alluded to Lady Caroline, I do not know ; but I rather think not, as it would have served no purpose and only inflicted pain. No doubt, her brother had long since believed her dead, as we and the world had done.

In that same world, one man, even a nobleman, is of little account. Lord Ravenel sank in its wide waste of waters, and they closed over him. Whether he were drowned or saved, was of small moment to any one. He was soon forgotten,—everywhere except at Beechwood; and sometimes it seemed as if he were even forgotten there. Save that in our family we found it hard to learn this easy, convenient habit—to forget.

Hard, though seven years had passed since we saw Guy's merry face, to avoid missing it keenly still. The mother, as her years crept on, oftentimes wearied for him with a yearning that could not be told. The father, as Edwin became engrossed in his own affairs and Walter's undecided temperament kept him a boy long after boyhood, often seemed to look round vaguely for an eldest son's young strength to lean upon; often said anxiously, "I wish Guy were at home."

Yet still there was no hint of his coming; better he never came at all than came against his will, or came to meet the least pain, the shadow of disgrace. And he was contented and pros-

perous in the western world, leading an active and useful life, earning an honourable name. He had taken a partner, he told us ; there was real friendship between them, and they were doing well ; perhaps might make, in a few years, one of those rapid fortunes which clever men of business do make in America, and did especially at that time.

He was also eager and earnest upon other and higher cares than mere business ; entered warmly into his father's sympathy about many political measures now occupying men's minds. A great number of comparative facts concerning the factory children in England and America ; a mass of evidence used by Mr. Fowell Buxton in his arguments for the abolition of slavery ; and many other things, originated in the impulsive activity, now settled into mature manly energy, of Mr. Guy Halifax, of Boston, U. S.—“ our Guy.”

“ The lad is making a stir in the world,” said his father one day, when we had read his last letter. “ I shall not wonder if when he comes home, a deputation from his native Norton Bury were to appear, requesting him to accept

the honour of representing them in Parliament. He would suit them—at least, as regards the canvassing and the ladies—a great deal better than his old father—eh, love?”

Mrs. Halifax smiled, rather unwillingly, for her husband referred to a subject which had cost her some pain at the time. After the Reform Bill passed, many of our neighbours, who had long desired that one of John's high character, practical knowledge, and influence in the town, should be its M.P., and were aware that his sole objection to entering the House was the said question of Reform, urged him very earnestly to stand for Norton Bury.

To everybody's surprise, and none more than our own, he refused.

Publicly he assigned no reason for this, except his conviction that he could not discharge as he ought and as he would once have done, duties which he held so sacred and indispensable. His letter, brief and simple, thanking his “good neighbours,” and wishing them “a younger and worthier” member, might be found in some old file of the Norton Bury Herald still. Even the Norton

Bury Mercury, in reprinting it, commented on its touching honesty and brevity, and—concluding his political career was ended with it,—condescended to bestow on Mr. Halifax the usual obituary line—

“We could have better spared a better man.”

When his family, and even his wife, reasoned with him, knowing that to enter parliament had long been his thought, nay, his desire, and perhaps herself taking a natural pride in the idea of seeing M.P.—M.P. of a new and unbribed House of Commons—after his well-beloved name;—to us and to her he gave no clearer motive for his refusal than to the electors of Norton Bury.

“But you are not old, John,” I argued with him one day; “you possess to the full *mens sana in corpore sano*. No man can be more fitted than yourself to serve his country, as you used to say it might be served, and you yourself might serve it after Reform was gained.”

He smiled, and jocularly thanked me for my good opinion.

“Nay, such service is almost your duty; you yourself once thought so too. Why have you changed your mind?”

“I have not changed my mind, but circumstances have changed my actions. As for duty—duty begins at home. Believe me, I have thought well over the subject. Brother, we will not refer to it again.”

I saw that something in the matter pained him, and obeyed his wish. Even when, a few days after, perhaps as some compensation for the mother's disappointment, he gave this hint of Guy's taking his place and entering Parliament in his room.

For any one—nay, his own son—to take John's place, to stand in John's room, was not a pleasant thought, even in jest; we let it pass by unanswered, and John himself did not recur to it.

Thus time went on, placidly enough; the father and mother changed into grandfather and grandmother, and little Maud into Auntie Maud. She bore her new honours and fulfilled her new duties with great delight and

success. She had altered much of late years : at twenty, was as old as many a woman of thirty—in all the advantages of age. She was sensible, active, resolute, and wise ; sometimes thoughtful, or troubled with fits of what in any less wholesome temperament would have been melancholy ; but as it was her humours only betrayed themselves in some slight restlessness or irritability, easily soothed by a few tender words or a rush out to Edwin's, and a peaceful coming back to that happy home, whose principal happiness she knew that she, the only daughter, made.

She more than once had unexceptionable chances of quitting it ; for Miss Halifax possessed plenty of attractions, both outwardly and inwardly, to say nothing of her not inconsiderable fortune. But she refused all offers, and to the best of our knowledge was a free-hearted damsel still.

Her father and mother seemed rather glad of this than otherwise. They would not have denied her any happiness she wished for ; still it was evidently a relief to them that she was slow in choosing it : slow in quitting their arms of

love to risk a love untried. Sometimes, such is the weakness of parental humanity, I verily believe they looked forward with complacency to the possibility of her remaining always Miss Halifax. I remember one day, when Lady Oldtower was suggesting—half jest, half earnest, “better any marriage than no marriage at all ;” Maud’s father replied, very seriously—

“Better no marriage, than any marriage that is less than the best.”

“How do you mean?”

“I believe,” he said, smiling, “that somewhere in the world every man has his right wife, every woman her right husband. If my Maud’s comes, he shall have her. If not, I shall be well content to see her a happy old maid.”

Thus after many storms, came this lull in our lives ; a season of busy yet monotonous calm.—I have heard say that peace itself, to be perfect, ought to be monotonous. We had enough of it to satisfy our daily need—we looked forward to more of it in time to come, when Guy should be at home, when we should see safely secured the futures of all the children,

and for ourselves a green old age, "journeying in long serenity away."

A time of heavenly calm—which as I look back upon it, grows heavenlier still! — Soft summer days and autumn afternoons, spent under the beech-wood, or on the Flat. Quiet winter evenings, all to ourselves—Maud and her mother working, Walter drawing. The father sitting with his back to the lamp—its light making a radiance over his brow and white bald crown, and as it thrilled through the curls behind, restoring somewhat of the youthful colour to his fading hair. Nay, the old youthful ring of his voice I caught at times, when he found something funny in his book and read it out loud to us; or laying it down, sat talking, as he liked to talk, about things, speculative, philosophical, or poetical—things which he had necessarily let slip in the hurry and press of his business life, in the burthen and heat of the day; but which now as the cool shadows of evening were drawing on, assumed a beauty and a nearness, and were again caught up by him—precious as the dreams of his youth.

Happy, happy time — sunshiny summer, peaceful winter—we marked neither as they passed ; but now we hold both in a sacredness inexpressible—a foretaste of that Land where there is neither summer nor winter, neither days nor years.

The first break in our repose came early in the new year. There had been no Christmas letter from Guy, and he never once in all his wanderings had missed writing home at Christmas time. When the usual monthly mail came in, and no word from him—a second month, and yet nothing—we began to wonder about his omission less openly—to cease scolding him for his carelessness. Though over and over again we still eagerly brought up instances of the latter—“Guy used to be such a thoughtless boy about correspondence.”

Gradually, as his mother's cheek grew paler, and his father more anxious-eyed, more compulsorily cheerful, we gave up discussing publicly the many excellent reasons why no letters should come from Guy. We had written as usual, by every mail. By the last—by the March

mail, I saw that in addition to the usual packet for Mr. Guy Halifax—his father, taking another precautionary measure, had written in business form to “Messrs. Guy Halifax and Co.” Guy had always, “just like his carelessness!” omitted to give the name of his partner; but addressed thus, in case of any sudden journey or illness of Guy’s, the partner, whoever he was, would be sure to write.

In May—nay, it was on May-day, I remember, for we were down in the mill-meadows with Louise and her little ones, going a-maying—there came in the American mail.

It brought a large packet—all our letters of this year sent back again, directed in a strange hand, to “John Halifax, Esquire, Beechwood,” with the annotation, “By Mr. Guy Halifax’s desire.”

Among the rest—though the sickening sight of them had blinded even his mother at first, so that her eye did not catch it, was one that explained—most satisfactorily explained, we said—the reason they were thus returned. It was a few lines from Guy himself, stating that unexpected good fortune had made him determine

to come home at once. If circumstances thwarted this intention, he would write without fail ; otherwise he should most likely sail by an American merchantman—the Stars-and-Stripes.

“Then he is coming home. On his way home !”

And the mother, as with one shaking hand she held fast the letter, with the other steadied herself by the rail of John’s desk—I guessed now why he had ordered all the letters to be brought first to his counting-house. “When do you think we shall see—Guy ?”

At thought of that happy sight, her bravery broke down. She wept heartily and long.

John sat still, leaning over the front of his desk. By his sigh, deep and glad, one could tell what a load was lifted off the father’s heart, at prospect of his son’s return.

“The liners are only a month in sailing ; but this is a barque most likely, which take longer time. Love, show me the date of the boy’s letter.”

She looked for it herself. It was in *January* !

The sudden fall from certainty to uncertainty—the wild clutch at that which hardly

seemed a real joy until seen fading down to a mere hope, a chance, a possibility—who has not known all this ?

I remember how we all stood—mute and panic-struck, in the dark little counting-house. I remember seeing Louise, with her children in the door-way, trying to hush their laughing, and whispering to them something about “poor Uncle Guy.”

John was the first to grasp the unspoken dread, and show that it was less than at first appeared.

“We ought to have had this letter two months ago ; this shows how often delays occur—we ought not to be surprised or uneasy at anything. Guy does not say when the ship was to sail—she may be on her voyage still. If he had but given the name of her owners ! But I can write to Lloyd’s, and find out everything. Cheer up, mother.—Please God, you shall have that wandering, heedless boy of yours back before long.”

He replaced the letters in their enclosure—held a general consultation, into which he threw a passing gleam of faint gaiety, as to whether

being ours, we had a right to burn them, or whether having passed through the post-office they were not the writer's but the owner's property, and Guy could claim them with all their useless news, on his arrival in England. This was finally decided, and the mother, with a faint smile, declared that nobody should touch them; she would put them under lock and key "till Guy came home."

Then she took her husband's arm; and the rest of us followed them, as they walked slowly up the hill to Beechwood.

But after that day Mrs. Halifax's strength decayed. Not suddenly, scarcely perceptibly; not with any outward complaint, except what she jested over as "the natural weakness of old age;" but there was an evident change. Week by week, her long walks shortened; she gave up her village school to me; and though she went about the house still and insisted on keeping the keys, gradually, "just for the sake of practice," the domestic surveillance fell into the hands of Maud.

An answer arrived from Lloyd's: the Stars-and-Stripes was an American vessel, probably

of small tonnage and importance, for the underwriters knew nothing of it.

More delay—more suspense. The summer days came—but not Guy. No news of him—not a word—not a line.

His father wrote to America—pursuing enquiries in all directions. At last, some tangible clue was caught. The *Stars-and-Stripes* had sailed, had been spoken with about the Windward Isles—and never heard of afterwards.

Still, there was a hope—John told the hope first, before he ventured to speak of the missing ship, and even then had to break the news gently, for the mother had grown frail and weak, and could not bear things as she used to do. She clung as if they had been words of life or death, to the ship-owner's postscript—"that they had no recollection of the name of Halifax; there might have been such a gentleman on board—they could not say. But it was not probable; for the *Stars-and-Stripes* was a trading vessel, and had not good accommodation for passengers."

Then came week after week—I know not

how they went by—one never does, afterwards. At the time, they were frightfully vivid, hour by hour; we rose each morning, sure that some hope would come in the course of the day; we went to bed at night, heavily, as if there were no such thing as hope in the world. Gradually, and I think that was the worst consciousness of all—our life of suspense became perfectly natural; and everything in and about the house went on as usual, just as though we knew quite well—what the Almighty Father alone knew!—where our poor lad was, and what had become of him. Or rather, as if we had settled in the certainty which perhaps the end of our own lives alone would bring us, that he had slipped out of life altogether, and there was no such being as Guy Halifax under this pitiless sun.

The mother's heart was breaking. She made no moan, but we saw it in her face. One morning—it was the morning after John's birth-day, which we had made a feint of keeping, with Grace Oldtower, the two little grandchildren, Edwin and Louise—she was absent at breakfast and dinner; she had not slept well,

and was too tired to rise. Many days following it happened the same ; with the same faint excuse, or with no excuse at all. How we missed her about the house !—ay, changed as she had been. How her husband wandered about, ghost-like, from room to room !—could not rest anywhere, or do anything. Finally, he left our company altogether, and during the hours that he was at home rarely quitted for more than a few minutes the quiet, dark bed-chamber, where, every time his foot entered it, the poor pale face looked up and smiled.

Ay, smiled ; for I noticed, as many another may have done in similar cases, that when her physical health definitely gave way, her mental health returned. The heavy burthen was lighter ; she grew more cheerful, more patient ; seemed to submit herself to the Almighty will, whatever it might be. As she lay on her sofa in the study, where one or two evenings John carried her down, almost as easily as he used to carry little Muriel, his wife would rest content with her hand in his, listening to his reading, or quietly looking at him, as though her lost

son's face which a few weeks since she said haunted her continually, were now forgotten in his father's. Perhaps she thought the one she should soon see—while the other—

“Phineas,” she whispered one day, when I was putting a shawl over her feet, or doing some other trifle that she thanked me for—
“Phineas,—if anything happened to me, you will comfort John?”

Then first I began seriously and sadly to contemplate a possibility, hitherto as impossible and undreamed of as that the moon should drop out of the height of heaven—What would the house be without the mother?

Her children never suspected this, I saw: but they were young. For her husband—

I could not understand John. He, so quick-sighted; he who meeting any sorrow looked steadily up at the Hand that smote him, knowing neither the coward's dread, nor the unbeliever's disguise of pain—surely he must see what was impending. Yet he was as calm as if he saw it not. Calm, as no man could be, contemplating the supreme parting between two

who nearly all their lives had been not two, but one flesh with one heart between them.

Yet I had once heard him say that a great love and only a great love makes parting easy. Could it be that this love of his, which had clasped his wife so firmly, faithfully, and long, fearlessly clasped her still, by its own perfectness assured of its immortality?

But all the while his human love clung about her, showing itself in a thousand forms of watchful tenderness. And hers clung to him, closely, dependently; she let herself be taken care of, ruled, and guided, as if with him she found helplessness restful and submission sweet. Many a little outward fondness, that when people have been long married naturally drops into disuse, was revived again; he would bring her flowers out of the garden, or new books from the town; and many a time, when no one noticed, I have seen him stoop and press his lips upon the faded hand, where the wedding-ring hung so loosely;—his own for so many years, his own till the dust claimed it, that well-beloved hand!

Ay, he was right. Loss, affliction, death itself, are powerless in the presence of such a love as theirs.

It was already the middle of July. From January to July,—six months ! Our neighbours without—and there were many who felt for us—never asked now, “ Is there any news of Mr. Guy ? ” Even pretty Grace Oldtower—pretty still, but youthful no longer—only lifted her eyes enquiringly as she crossed our doorway, and dropped them again with a hopeless sigh. She had loved us all, faithfully and well, for a great many years.

One night, when Miss Oldtower had just gone home after staying with us the whole day—Maud and I sat by ourselves in the study, where we generally sat now. The father spent all his evenings up-stairs. We could hear his step overhead as he crossed the room or opened the window, then drew his chair back to its constant place by his wife’s bedside. Sometimes there was a faint murmur of reading or talk ; then long silence.

Maud and I sat in silence too. She had her own thoughts—I mine. Perhaps they were

often one and the same : perhaps—for youth is youth after all—they may have diverged widely. Hers were deep, absorbed thoughts, at any rate ; travelling fast—fast as her needle travelled ; for she had imperceptibly fallen into her mother's ways and her mother's work.

We had the lamp lit, but the windows were wide open ; and through the sultry summer night we could hear the trickle of the stream and the rustle of the leaves in the beech-wood. We sat very still, waiting for nothing, expecting nothing ; in the dull patience which always fell on us about this hour—the hour before bed-time, when nothing more was to be looked for but how best to meet another dreary day.

“ Maud, was that the click of the front gate swinging ? ”

“ No, I told Walter to lock it before he went to bed. Last night it disturbed my mother. ”

Again silence. So deep that the maid's opening the door made us both start.

“ Miss Halifax—there's a gentleman wanting to see Miss Halifax. ”

Maud sprung up in her chair, breathless.

“Any one you know, is it?”

“No, Miss.”

“Show the gentleman in.”

He stood already in the doorway,—tall, brown, bearded. Maud just glanced at him, then rose, bending stiffly, after the manner of Miss Halifax of Beechwood.

“Will you be seated? My father—”

“Maud, don’t you know me? Where’s my mother? I am Guy.”

CHAPTER XI.

GUY and his mother were together. She lay on a sofa in her dressing-room ; he sat on a stool beside her, so that her arm could rest on his neck and she could now and then turn his face towards her and look at it ;—oh, what a look !

She had had him with her for two whole days—two days to be set against eight years ! Yet the eight years seemed already to have collapsed into a span of time, and the two days to have risen up a great mountain of happiness, making a barrier complete against the woful past, as happiness can do—thanks to the All-merciful for all His mercies. Most especially for that mercy—true as His truth to the experience of all pure hearts,—that one bright, brief season of joy can outweigh, in reality and even in remem-

brance, whole years of apparently interminable pain.

Two days only since the night Guy came home, and yet it seemed months ago ! Already we had grown familiar to the tall bearded figure ; the strange step and voice about the house ; all except Maud, who was rather shy and reserved still. We had ceased the endeavour to reconcile this our Guy—this tall, grave man of nearly thirty, looking thirty-five and more—with Guy, the boy that left us, the boy that in all our lives we never should find again. Nevertheless, we took him, just as he was, to our hearts, rejoicing in him one and all with inexpressible joy.

He was much altered, certainly. It was natural, nay, right, that he should be. He had suffered much ; a great deal more than he ever told us—at least, not till long after ; had gone through poverty, labour, sickness, shipwreck. He had written home by the Stars-and-Stripes—sailed a fortnight later by another vessel—been cast away—picked up by an outward-bound ship,—and finally landed in England, he and his partner, as penniless as they left it.

"Was your partner an Englishman then?" said Maud, who sat at the foot of the sofa, listening. "You have not told us anything about him yet."

Guy half smiled. "I will, by-and-by. It's a long story. Just now I don't want to think of anybody or anything except my mother."

He turned, as he did twenty times a-day, to press his rough cheek upon her hand and look up into her thin face, his eyes overflowing with love.

"You must get well now, mother. Promise!"

Her smile promised—and even began the fulfilment of the same.

"I think she looks stronger already;—does she, Maud? You know her looks better than I; I don't ever remember her being ill in old times. Oh, mother, I will never leave you again—never!"

"No, my boy."

"No, Guy, no."—John came in, and stood watching them both contentedly. "No, my son, you must never leave your mother."

"I will not leave either of you, father," said Guy, with a reverent affection that must have

gladdened the mother's heart to the very core. Giving up his place by her, Guy took Maud's, facing them ; and father and son began to talk of various matters concerning their home and business arrangements ; taking counsel together, as father and son ought to do. These eight years of separation seemed to have brought them nearer together ; the difference between them—in age, far less than between most fathers and sons, had narrowed into a meeting point. Never in all his life had Guy been so deferent, so loving to his father. And with a peculiar trust and tenderness, John's heart turned to his eldest son, the heir of his name, his successor at Enderley Mills. For, in order that Guy might at once take his natural place and feel no longer a waif and stray upon the world, already a plan had been started, that the firm of Halifax and Sons should become Halifax Brothers. Perhaps, ere very long—only the mother said privately, rather anxiously too, that she did not wish this part of the scheme to be mentioned to Guy just now—perhaps, ere long it would be “ Guy Hali-

fax, Esquire, of Beechwood ;” and “the old people” at happy little Longfield.

As yet, Guy had seen nobody but ourselves, and nobody had seen Guy. Though his mother gave various good reasons why he should not make his public appearance as a “shipwrecked mariner”—costume and all, yet it was easy to perceive that she looked forward not without apprehension to some meetings which must necessarily soon occur, but to which Guy made not the smallest allusion. He had asked, cursorily and generally, after “all my brothers and sisters,” and been answered in the same tone ; but neither he nor we had as yet mentioned the names of Edwin or Louise.

They knew he was come home ; but how and where the first momentous meeting should take place, we left entirely to chance, or, more rightly speaking, to Providence.

So it happened thus. Guy was sitting quietly on the sofa at his mother’s feet, and his father and he were planning together in what way could best be celebrated, by our school-children, tenants, and work-people, an event

which we took a great interest in, though not greater than in this year was taken by all classes throughout the kingdom—the day fixed for the abolition of Negro Slavery in our Colonies—the 1st of August, 1834. He sat in an attitude that reminded me of his boyish lounging ways; the picture of content; though a stream of sunshine pouring in upon his head through the closed Venetian blind, showed many a deep line of care on his forehead, and more than one silver thread among his brown hair.

In a pause—during which no one exactly liked to ask what we were all thinking about—there came a little tap at the door, and a little voice outside.

“Please, me want to come in.”

Maud jumped up, to refuse admission; but Mr. Halifax forbade her, and himself went and opened the door. A little child stood there—a little girl of three years old.

Apparently guessing who she was, Guy rose up hastily, and sat down in his place again.

“Come in, little maid,” said the father; “come in, and tell us what you want.”

“Me want to see Grannie and Uncle Guy.”

Guy started, but still he kept his seat.. The mother took her grandchild in her feeble arms, and kissed her, saying softly,

“There—that is Uncle Guy. Go and speak to him.”

And then, touching his knees, Guy felt the tiny, fearless hand. He turned round, and looked at the little thing, reluctantly, inquisitively. Still he did not speak to or touch her.

“Are you Uncle Guy?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you kiss me? Everybody kisses me,” said everybody’s pet; neither frightened nor shy; never dreaming of a repulse.

Nor did she find it. Her little fingers were suffered to cling round the tightly-closed hand.

“What is your name, my dear?”

“Louise—mamma’s little Louise.”

Guy put back the curls, and gazed long and wistfully into the childish face, where the inherited beauty was repeated line for line. But softened, spiritualized, as, years after its burial, some ghost of a man’s old sorrows may rise

up and meet him, the very spirit of peace shining out of its celestial eyes.

“ Little Louise, you are very like—”

He stopped—and bending down, kissed her. In that kiss vanished for ever the last shadow of his boyhood’s love. Not that he forgot it—God forbid that any good man should ever either forget or be ashamed of his first love! But it and all its pain fled far away, back into the sacred eternities of dream-land.

When, looking up at last, he saw a large, fair, matronly lady sitting by his mother’s sofa, Guy neither started nor turned pale. It was another and not his lost Louise. He rose and offered her his hand.

“ You see, your little daughter has made friends with me already. She is very like you; only she has Edwin’s hair. Where is my brother Edwin?”

“ Here, old fellow. Welcome home.”

The two brothers met warmly, nay, affectionately. Edwin was not given to demonstration; but I saw how his features twitched, and how he busied himself over the knots in his little girl’s pinafore for a minute or more. When he spoke

again, it was as if nothing had happened and Guy had never been away.

For the mother, she lay with her arms folded, looking from one to the other mutely, or closing her eyes, with a faint stirring of the lips, like prayer. It seemed as if she dared only *thus* to gaze in the face of her exceeding joy.

Soon, Edwin and Louise left us for an hour or two, and Guy went on with the history of his life in America and his partner who had come home with him, and, like himself, had lost his all.

“Harder for him than for me ; he is older than I am. He knew nothing whatever of business when he offered himself as my clerk ; since then he has worked like a slave. In a fever I had, he nursed me ; he has been to me these three years the best, truest friend. He is the noblest fellow. Father, if you only knew—”

“Well, my son, let me know him. Invite the gentleman to Beechwood ; or shall I write and ask him ? Maud, fetch me your mother’s desk. Now then, Guy—you are a very forgetful fellow still ; you have never yet told us your friend’s name.”

Guy looked steadily at his father, in his own

straightforward way; hesitated—then apparently made up his mind.

“I did not tell you, because he wished me not; not till you understood him as well as I do. You knew him yourself once—but he has wisely dropped his title. Since he came over to me in America, he has been only Mr. William Ravenel.”

This discovery—natural enough when one began to think over it, but incredible at first, astounded us all. For Maud—well it was that the little Louise seated in her lap hid and controlled in some measure the violent agitation of poor Auntie Maud.

Ay—Maud loved him. Perhaps she had guessed the secret cause of his departure, and love creates love, oftentimes. Then his brave renunciation of rank, fortune, even of herself—women glory in a moral hero—one who has strength to lose even love, and bear its loss, for the sake of duty or of honour. His absence, too, might have done much:—absence which smothers into decay a rootless fancy, but often nourishes the least seed of a true affection into full-flowering love. Ay—Maud loved him. How,

or why, or when, at first, no one could tell—perhaps not even herself; but so it was, and her parents saw it.

Both were deeply moved—her brother likewise.

“Father,” he whispered, “have I done wrong? I did not know—how could I guess?”

“No, no—my son. It is very strange—all things just now seem so strange. Maud, my child,”—and John roused himself out of a long silence into which he was falling,—“go, and take Louise to her mother.”

The girl rose, eager to get away. As she crossed the room—the little creature clinging round her neck, and she clasping it close, in the sweet motherliness of character which had come to her so early—I thought—I hoped—

“Maud!” said John, catching her hand as she passed him by—“Maud is not afraid of her father?”

“No,”—in troubled uncertainty—then with a passionate decision, as if ashamed of herself—
“No!”

She leaned over his chair-back and kissed him—then went out.

“ Now—Guy.”

Guy told, in his own frank way, all the history of himself and William Ravenel; how the latter had come to America, determined to throw his lot for good or ill, to sink or swim, with Maud's brother—chiefly, as Guy had slowly discovered, because he was Maud's brother. At last—in the open boat, on the Atlantic, with death the great Revealer of all things staring them in the face—the whole secret came out. It made them better than friends—brothers.

This was Guy's story, told with a certain spice of determination too, as if—let his father's will be what it might, his own, which had now also settled into the strong “family” will, was resolute on his friend's behalf. Yet when he saw how grave, nay sad, the father sat, he became humble again, and ended his tale even as he had begun, with the entreaty—“ Father, if you only knew—”

“ My knowing and my judging seem to have been of little value, my son. Be it so. There is One wiser than I—One in whose hands are the issues of all things.”

The sort of contrition with which he spoke—

thus retracting, as it costs most men so much to retract, a decision given however justly at the time, but which fate has afterwards pronounced unjust, affected his son deeply.

“Father, your decision was right,—William says it was. He says also, that it could not have been otherwise ; that whatever he has become since, he owes it all to you, and to what passed that day. Though he loves her still, will never love any one else ; yet he declares his loss of her has proved his salvation.”

“He is right,” said Mrs. Halifax. “Love is worth nothing that will not stand trial—a fiery trial, if needs be. And as I have heard John say many and many a time—as he said that very night—in this world there is not, ought not to be, any such words as ‘too late.’”

John made no answer. He sat, his chin propped on his right hand, the other pressed against his bosom—his favourite attitude. Once or twice, with a deep-drawn, painful breath, he sighed.

Guy’s eagerness could not rest. “Father, I told him I would either write to or see him to-day.”

“Where is he?”

“At Norton Bury. Nothing would induce him to come here, unless certain that you desired it.”

“I do desire it.”

Guy started up with great joy. “Shall I write, then?”

“I will write myself.”

But John’s hand shook so much, that instead of his customary free bold writing, he left only blots upon the page. He leant back in his chair, and said faintly :

“I am getting an old man, I see. Guy, it was high time you came home.”

Mrs. Halifax thought he was tired and made a place for his head on her pillow, where he rested some minutes, “just to please her,” he said. Then he rose, and declared he would himself drive over to Norton Bury for our old friend.

“Nay, let me write, father. To-morrow will do just as well.”

The father shook his head. “No—it must be to-day.”

Bidding good-bye to his wife—he never by any chance quitted her for an hour without a special tender leave-taking—John went away.

Guy was, he avouched, “as happy as a king.”

His old liveliness returned ; he declared that in this matter, which had long weighed heavily on his mind, he had acted like a great diplomatist, or like the gods themselves, whom some unexact-ing, humble youth calls upon to

“ Annihilate both time and space,
And make two lovers happy ! ”

“ And I’m sure I shall be happy too, in seeing them. They shall be married immediately. And we’ll take William into partnership—that was a whim of his, mother—we call one another ‘ Guy ’ and ‘ William,’ just like brothers. Heigho ! I’m very glad. Are not you ? ”

The mother smiled.

“ You will soon have nobody left but me. No matter. I shall have you all to myself, and be at once a spoiled child and an uncommonly merry old bachelor.”

Again the mother smiled, without reply. She too, doubtless thought herself a great diplomatist.

William Ravenel—he was henceforward never anything to us but William—came home with Mr. Halifax. First, the mother saw him ; then I heard the father go to the maiden bower where Maud had shut herself up all day—poor

child!—and fetch his daughter down. Lastly, I watched the two—Mr. Ravenel and Miss Halifax—walk together down the garden and into the beech-wood, where the leaves were whispering and the stock-doves cooing; and where, I suppose, they told and listened to the old tale—old as Adam—yet for ever beautiful and new.

That day was a wonderful day. That night we gathered, as we never thought we should gather again in this world, round the family table—Guy, Edwin, Walter, Maud, Louise, and William Ravenel—all changed, yet not one lost. A true love-feast it was: a renewed celebration of the family bond, which had lasted through so much sorrow, now knitted up once more, never to be broken.

When we came quietly to examine one another and fall into one another's old ways, there was less than one might have expected even of outward change. The table appeared the same; all took instinctively their old places, except that the mother lay on her sofa, and Maud presided at the urn.

It did one's heart good to look at Maud, as

she busied herself about, in her capacity as *vice-reine* of the household ; perhaps, with a natural feeling, liking to show some one present how mature and sedate she was—not so very young after all. You could see she felt deeply how much he loved her—how her love was to him like the restoring of his youth. The responsibility, sweet as it was, made her womanly, made her grave. She would be to him at once wife and child, plaything and comforter, sustainer and sustained. Ay, love levels all things. They were not ill-matched, in spite of those twenty years.

And so I left them, and went and sat with John and Ursula—we, the generation passing away, or ready to pass, in heaven's good time, to make room for these. We talked but little, our hearts were too full. Early, before anybody thought of moving, John carried his wife up-stairs again, saying that, well as she looked, she must be compelled to economise both her good looks and her happiness.

When he came down again, he stood talking for some time with Mr. Ravenel. While he talked, I thought he looked wearied—pallid even to ex-

haustion ; a minute or two afterward she silently left the room.

I followed him, and found him leaning against the chimney-piece in his study.

“ Who’s that ? ” He spoke feebly ; he looked—ghastly !

I called him by his name.

“ Come in. Fetch no one. Shut the door.”

The words were hoarse and abrupt, but I obeyed.

“ Phineas,” he said, again holding out a hand, as if he thought he had grieved me ; “ don’t mind. I shall be better presently. I know quite well what it is—oh, my God—my God ! ”

Sharp, horrible pain—such as human nature shrinks from—such as makes poor mortal flesh cry out in its agony to its Maker, as if, for the time being, life itself were worthless at such a price. I know now what it must have been ; I know now what he must have endured.

He held me fast, half unconscious as he was, lest I should summon help ; and when a step was heard in the passage, as once before—the day Edwin was married—how, on a sudden, I re-

membered all !—he tottered forward and locked, double-locked, the door.

After a few minutes the worst suffering apparently abated, and he sat down again in his chair. I got some water ; he drank, and let me bathe his face with it—his face, grey and death-like—John's face !

But I am telling the bare facts—nothing more. A few heavy sighs, gasped as it were for life, and he was himself again.

“Thank God, it is over now ! Phineas, you must try and forget all you have seen. I wish you had not come to the door.”

He said this, not in any tone that could wound me, but tenderly, as if he were very sorry for me.

“What is it ?”

“There is no need for alarm ;—no more than that day—you recollect ?—in this room. I had an attack once before then—a few times since. It is horrible pain while it lasts, you see ; I can hardly bear it. But it goes away again, as you also see. It would be a pity to tell my wife, or anybody ; in fact, I had rather not. You understand ?”

He spoke thus in a matter-of-fact way, as if he thought the explanation would satisfy me and prevent my asking further. He was mistaken.

“John, what is it?”

“What is it? Why, something like what I had then; but it comes rarely, and I am well again directly. I had much rather not talk about it. Pray, forget it.”

But I could not; nor, I thought, could he. He took up a book and sat still; though oftentimes I caught his eyes fixed on my face with a peculiar earnestness, as if he would fain test my strength—fain find out how much I loved him; and loving, how much I could bear.

“You are not reading, John; you are thinking—what about?”

He paused a little, as if undetermined whether or not to tell me; then said: “About your father. Do you remember him?”

I looked surprised at the question.

“I mean, do you remember how he died?”

Somehow—though, God knows, not at that dear and sacred remembrance—I shuddered.

“Yes; but why should we talk of it now?”

“Why not? I have often thought what a happy death it was—painless, instantaneous, without any wasting sickness beforehand—his sudden passing from life present to life eternal. Phineas, your father’s was the happiest death I ever knew.”

“It may be—I am not sure.—John,” for again something in his look and manner struck me—“why do you say this to me?”

“I scarcely know—Yes, I do know.”

“Tell me, then.”

He looked at me across the table—steadily, eye to eye, as if he would fain impart to my spirit the calmness that was in his own. “I believe, Phineas, that when I die, my death will be not unlike your father’s.”

Something came wildly to my lips about “impossibility,” the utter impossibility, of any man’s thus settling the manner of his death, or the time.

“I know that. I know that I may live ten or twenty years, and die of another disease after all.”

“Disease!”

“Nay—it is nothing to be afraid of. You see am not afraid. I have guessed it for many years. I have known it, for a certainty, ever since I was in Paris.”

“Were you ill in Paris?—You never said so.”

“No—because—Phineas, do you think you could bear the truth? You know it makes no real difference. I shall not die an hour sooner for being aware of it.”

“Aware of—what? Say quickly.”

“Dr. K—— told me—I was determined to be told—that I had the disease I suspected; beyond medical power to cure. It is not immediately fatal; he said I might live many years, even to old age; and I might die, suddenly, at any moment, just as your father died.”

He said this gently and quietly—more quietly than I am writing the words down now; and I listened—I listened.

“Phineas!”

I felt the pressure of his warm hand on my shoulder—the hand which had led me like a brother’s all my life.

“Phineas, we have known one another these

forty years. Is our love, our faith, so small, that either of us, for himself or his brother, need be afraid of death?—”

“Phineas!”—and the second time he spoke there was some faint reproach in the tone; “no one knows this but you. I see I was right to hesitate; I almost wish I had not told you at all.”

Then—I rose. * * * *

At my urgent request, he explained to me fully and clearly the whole truth. It was, as most truths are, less terrible when wholly known. It had involved little suffering as yet, the paroxysms being few and rare. They had always occurred when he was alone, or when feeling them coming on, he could go away and bear them in solitude.

“I have always been able to do so until to-night. She has not the least idea—my wife, I mean.”

His voice failed.

“It has been terrible to me at times, the thought of my wife. Perhaps I ought to have told her. Often I resolved I would, and then changed my mind. Latterly, since she has

been ill, I have believed, almost hoped, that she would not need to be told at all."

"Would you rather, then, that she——"

John calmly took up the word I shrank from uttering. "Yes; I would rather of the two that she went away first. She would suffer less, and it would be for such a little while."

He spoke as one would speak of a new abode, an impending journey. To him the great change, the last terror of humanity, was a thought—solemn indeed, but long familiar and altogether without fear. And, as we sat there, something of his spirit passed into mine: I felt how narrow is the span between the life mortal and the life immortal—how, in truth, both are one with God.

"Ay," he said, "that is exactly what I mean. To me there is always something impious in the 'preparing for death' that people talk about; as if we were not continually, whether in the flesh or out of it, living in the Father's presence; as if, come when He will, the Master should not find all of us watching. Do you remember saying so to me, one day?"

Ah, that day!

"Does it pain you, my talking thus? Because if so, we will cease."

"No—go on."

"That is right. I thought, this attack having been somewhat worse than my last, some one ought to be told. It has been a comfort to me to tell you—a great comfort, Phineas. Always remember that."

I have remembered it.

"Now, one thing more, and my mind is at ease. You see, though I may have years of life—I hope I shall—many busy years—I am never sure of a day, and I have to take many precautions. At home I shall be quite safe now." He smiled again, with evident relief. "And I rarely go anywhere without having one of my boys with me. Still, for fear—look here."

He showed me his pocket-book; on a card bearing his name and address, was written in his own legible hand, "*Home, and tell my wife carefully.*"

I returned the book. As I did so, there dropped out a little note—all yellow and faded—

his wife's only "love-letter,"—signed "Yours sincerely, Ursula March."

John picked it up, looked at it, and put it back in its place.

"Poor darling! poor darling!" He sighed, and was silent for awhile. "I am very glad Guy has come home; very glad that my little Maud is so happily settled—Hark! how those children are laughing!"

For the moment a natural shade of regret crossed the father's face, the father to whom all the delights of home had been so dear. But it soon vanished.

"How merry they are!—How strangely things have come about for us and ours! As Ursula was saying to-night, at this moment we have not a single care."

I grasped at that, for Dr. K—— had declared that if John had a quiet life,—a life without any anxieties,—he might, humanly speaking, attain a good old age.

"Ay, your father did. Who knows? we may both be old men yet, Phineas."

And as he rose, he looked strong in body

and mind, full of health and cheer—scarcely even on the verge of that old age of which he spoke. And I was older than he.

“Now, will you come with me to say good night to the children?”

At first I thought I could not—then, I could. After the rest had merrily dispersed, John and I stood for a long time in the empty parlour, his hand on my shoulder, as he used to stand when we were boys, talking.

What we said I shall not write, but I remember it, every word. And he—I *know* he remembers it still.

Then we clasped hands.

“Good night, Phineas.”

“Good night, John.”

CHAPTER XII.

FRIDAY, the first of August, 1834.

Many may remember that day ; what a soft, grey, summer morning it was, and how it broke out into brightness : how everywhere bells were ringing, club fraternities walking with bands and banners, school children having feasts and work-people holidays ; how, in town and country, there was spread abroad a general sense of benevolent rejoicing—because honest old England had lifted up her generous voice, nay, had paid down cheerfully her twenty millions, and in all her colonies the negro was free.

Many may still find in some forgotten drawer, the medal—bought by thousands and tens of thousands, of all classes, in copper, silver, or gold—distributed in charity-schools, and given by old people to their grandchildren. I saw Mrs.

Halifax tying one with a piece of blue ribbon round little Louise's neck, in remembrance of this day. The pretty medal, with the slave standing upright, stretching out to heaven free hands, from which the fetters are dropping—as I overheard John say to his wife, he could fancy the freeman Paul would stand in the Roman prison, when he answered to those that loved him, “ *I have fought the good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith.*”

Now, with my quickened ears, I often heard John talking quietly to his wife on this wise.

He kept by her side the whole forenoon—wheeling her about in her garden chair ; taking her to see her school-children in their glory on our lawn—to hear the shouts rising up from the people at the mill-yard below. For all Enderley, following the master's example, took an interest, hearty even among hearty hard-working England, in the Emancipation of the Slaves.

We had our own young people round us, and the day was a glorious day, they declared one and all.

John was happy too—infinately happy. After dinner, he carried his wife, who remained very feeble, to her chair beside the weeping ash, where she could smell the late hay in the meadow, and hear the ripple of the stream in the beech-wood—faint, for it was almost dried up now, but pleasant still. Her husband sat on the grass, making her laugh with his quaint sayings—admiring her in her new bonnet, and in the lovely white shawl—Guy's shawl—which Mr. Guy himself had really no time for admiring. He had gone off to the school tea-drinking, escorting his sister and sister-in-law, and another lady, whose eyes brightened with most “sisterly” joy whenever she glanced at her old play-fellow. Whose “sister” she nevertheless was not, nor was ever likely to be—and I questioned whether, in his secret heart, Guy had not begun to feel particularly thankful for that circumstance.

“Ah, mother,” cried the father, smiling, “you’ll see how it will end: all our young birds will soon be flown—there will be nobody left but you and me.”

“Never mind, John ;” and stooping over him, she gave him one of her quiet, soft kisses, precious now she was an old woman as they had been in the days of her bloom. “Never mind. Once there were only our two selves—now there will be only our two selves again. We shall be very happy. We only need one another.”

“Only one another, my darling.”

This last word, and the manner of his saying it, I can hear, if I listen to silence, clear as if yet I heard its sound. This last sight—of them sitting under the ash-tree, the sun making still whiter Ursula’s white shawl, brightening the marriage ring on her bare hand, and throwing, instead of silver, some of their boyish gold-colour into the edges of John’s curls—this picture I see with my shut eyes, vivid as yesterday.

I sat for some time in my room—then John came to fetch me for our customary walk along his favourite “terrace” on the Flat. He rarely liked to miss it ;—he said the day hardly seemed complete or perfect unless one had seen the sun go down. Thus, almost every evening, we used to spend an hour or more, pacing up and down,

or sitting in that little hollow under the brow of the Flat, where as from the topmost seat of a natural amphitheatre, one could see Rose Cottage and the old well-head where the cattle drank ; our own green garden-gate, the dark mass of the beech-wood, and far away beyond that, Nunnely Hill, where the sun went down.

There, having walked somewhat less time than usual, for the evening was warm and it had been a fatiguing day, John and I sat down together. We talked a little, ramblingly—chiefly of Longfield :—how I was to have my old room again—and how a new nursery was to be planned for the grandchildren.

“ We can’t get out of the way of children, I see clearly,” he said, laughing. “ We shall have Longfield just as full as ever it was, all summer time. But in winter we’ll be quiet, and sit by the chimney-corner, and plunge into my dusty desert of books—eh, Phineas ? You shall help me to make notes for those lectures I have intended giving at Norton Bury, these ten years past. And we’ll rub up our old Latin, and dip into modern poetry—great rubbish, I fear ! No-

body like our old friend Will of Avon, or even your namesake, worthy Phineas Fletcher."

I reminded him of the "Shepherd's life and fate," which he always liked so much, and used to say was his ideal of peaceful happiness.

"Well, and I think so still. 'Keep true to the dreams of thy youth,' saith the old German; I have not been false to mine. I have had a happy life, thank God; ay, and what few men can say, it has been the very sort of happiness I myself would have chosen. I think most lives, if, while faithfully doing our little best, day by day—we were content to leave their thread in wiser Hands than ours, would thus weave themselves out; until, looked back upon as a whole, they would seem as bright a web as mine."

He sat, talking thus, resting his chin on his hands—his eyes, calm and sweet, looking out westward—where the sun was about an hour from the horizon.

"Do you remember how we used to lie on the grass in your father's garden, and how we never could catch the sunset except in fragments between the abbey trees? I wonder if

they keep the yew-hedge clipped as round as ever."

I told him, Edwin had said to-day that some strange tenants were going to make an inn of the old house, and turn the lawn into a bowling-green.

"What a shame! I wish I could prevent it. And yet, perhaps not," he added, after a silence. "Ought we not rather to recognise and submit to the universal law of change? how each in his place is fulfilling his day, and passing away, just as that sun is passing. Only we know not whither he passes; while whither we go we know and the Way we know—the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever."

Almost before he had done speaking—(God grant that in the Kingdom I may hear that voice, not a tone altered—I would not wish it altered even there)—a whole troop of our young people came out of Mrs. Tod's cottage, and nodded to us from below.

There was Mrs. Edwin, standing talking to the good old soul, who admired her baby-boy

very much, but wouldn't allow there could be "any children like Mrs. Halifax's children."

There was Edwin, deep in converse with his brother Guy, while beside them—prettier and younger-looking than ever—Grace Oldtower was making a posy for little Louise.

Further down the slope, walking slowly, side by side, evidently seeing nobody but one another, were another couple.

"I think, sometimes, John, that those two, William and Maud, will be the happiest of all the children."

He smiled, looked after them for a minute, and then laid himself quietly down on his back along the slope, his eyes still directed towards the sunset. When, brightening as it descended, the sun shone level upon the place where we were sitting, I saw John pull his broad straw hat over his face, and compose himself with both hands clasped upon his breast, in the attitude of sleep.

I knew he was very tired, so I spoke no more, but threw my cloak over him. He looked up, thanked me silently, with his old familiar

smile.—One day—one day I shall know him by that smile! I sat for half an hour or more watching the sun, which sank steadily, slowly, round, and red, without a single cloud. Beautiful, as I had never before seen it; so clear, that one could note the very instant its disc touched the horizon's grey.

Maud and Mr. Ravenel were coming up the slope. I beckoned them to come softly, not to disturb the father. They and I sat in silence, facing the west. The sun journeyed down to his setting — lower — lower; there was a crescent, a line, a dim sparkle of light; then—he was gone. And still we sat—grave, but not sad—looking into the brightness he had left behind; believing, yea, knowing, we should see his glorious face again to-morrow.

“How cold it is grown,” said Maud. “I think we ought to wake my father.”

She went up to him, laid her hand upon his, that were folded together over the cloak—drew back startled—alarmed—

“Father!”

I put the child aside. It was I who moved the hat from John's face—*the* face—for John himself was far, far away. Gone from us unto Him whose faithful servant he was. While he was sleeping thus, the Master had called him.

His two sons carried him down the slope. They laid him in the upper room in Mrs. Tod's cottage. Then I went home to tell his wife.

* * * *

She was at last composed, as we thought, lying on her bed, death-like almost, but calm. It was ten o'clock at night. I left her with all her children watching round her.

I went out, up to Rose Cottage, to sit an hour by myself alone, looking at him whom I should not see again for—as he had said—"a little while."

"A little while—a little while." I comforted myself with those words. I fancied I could almost hear John saying them, standing near me, with his hand on my shoulder.—John himself, quite distinct from that which lay so still before

me ; beautiful as nothing but death can be, younger much than he had looked this very morning—younger by twenty years.

Farewell, John ! Farewell, my more than brother ! It is but for a little while.

As I sat, thinking how peacefully the hands lay, clasped together still, how sweet was the expression of the close mouth, and what a strange shadowy likeness the whole face bore to Muriel's little face, which I had seen resting in the same deep rest on the same pillow ;—some one touched me. It was Mrs. Halifax.

How she came, I do not know ; nor how she had managed to steal out from among her children. Nor how she, who had not walked for weeks, had found her way up hither, in the dark, all alone. Nor what strength, almost more than mortal, helped her to stand there, as she did stand, upright and calm—gazing—gazing as I had done.

“ It is very like him ; don't you think so, Phineas ? ” The voice low and soft, unbroken by any sob. “ He once told me, in case of—

this, he would rather I did not come and look at him ; but I can, you see."

I gave her my place, and she sat down by the bed. It might have been ten minutes or more that she and I remained thus, without exchanging a word.

"I think I hear some one at the door. Brother, will you call in the children?"

Guy altogether overcome, knelt down beside his mother, and besought her to let him take her home.

"Presently—presently, my son. You are very good to me ; but—your father. Children, come in and look at your father."

They all gathered round her—weeping ; but she spoke without a single tear.

"I was a girl, younger than any of you, when first I met your father. Next month, we shall have been married thirty-three years. Thirty-three years."

Her eyes grew dreamy, as if fancy had led her back all that space of time ; her fingers moved to and fro, mechanically, over her wedding-ring.

“Children, we were so happy, you cannot tell. He was so good ; he loved me so. Better than that, he made me good ; that was why I loved him. Oh, what his love was to me from the first ! strength, hope, peace ; comfort and help in trouble, sweetness in prosperity. How my life became happy and complete—how I grew worthier to myself because he had taken me for his own ! And what *he* was—Children, no one but me ever knew all his goodness, no one but himself ever knew how dearly I loved your father. We were more precious each to each than anything on earth ; except His service, who gave us to one another.”

Her voice dropped all but inaudible ; but she roused herself and made it once more clear and firm, the mother’s natural voice.

“Guy, Edwin, all of you, you must never forget your father. You must do as he wishes, and live as he lived—in all ways. You must love him, and love one another. Children, you will never do anything that need make you ashamed to meet your father?”

As they hung round her, she kissed them all—her three sons and her daughter, one by one; then, her mind being perhaps led astray by the room we were in, looked feebly round for one more child—remembered—smiled—

“How glad her father will be to have her again—his own little Muriel.”

“Mother! mother darling! come home,” whispered Guy, almost in a sob.

His mother stooped over him, gave him one kiss more—him, her favourite of all her children—and repeated the old phrase,

“Presently, presently! Now go away all of you: I want to be left for a little, alone with my husband.”

As we went out, I saw her turn toward the bed—“John, John!”—The same tone; almost the same words with which she had crept up to him years before, the day they were betrothed. Just a low, low murmur, like a tired child creeping to fond protecting arms. “John, John!”

We closed the door. We all sat on the stairs outside; it might have been for minutes, it might

have been for hours. Within or without—no one spoke—nothing stirred.

At last Guy softly went in.

She was still in the same place by the bedside, but half lying on the bed, as I had seen her turn when I was shutting the door. Her arm was round her husband's neck ; her face, pressed inwards to the pillow, was nestled close to his hair. They might have been asleep—both of them.

One of her children called her, but she neither answered nor stirred.

Guy lifted her up, very tenderly ; his mother, who had no stay left but him—his mother—a widow—

No, thank God ! she was not a widow now.

THE END.

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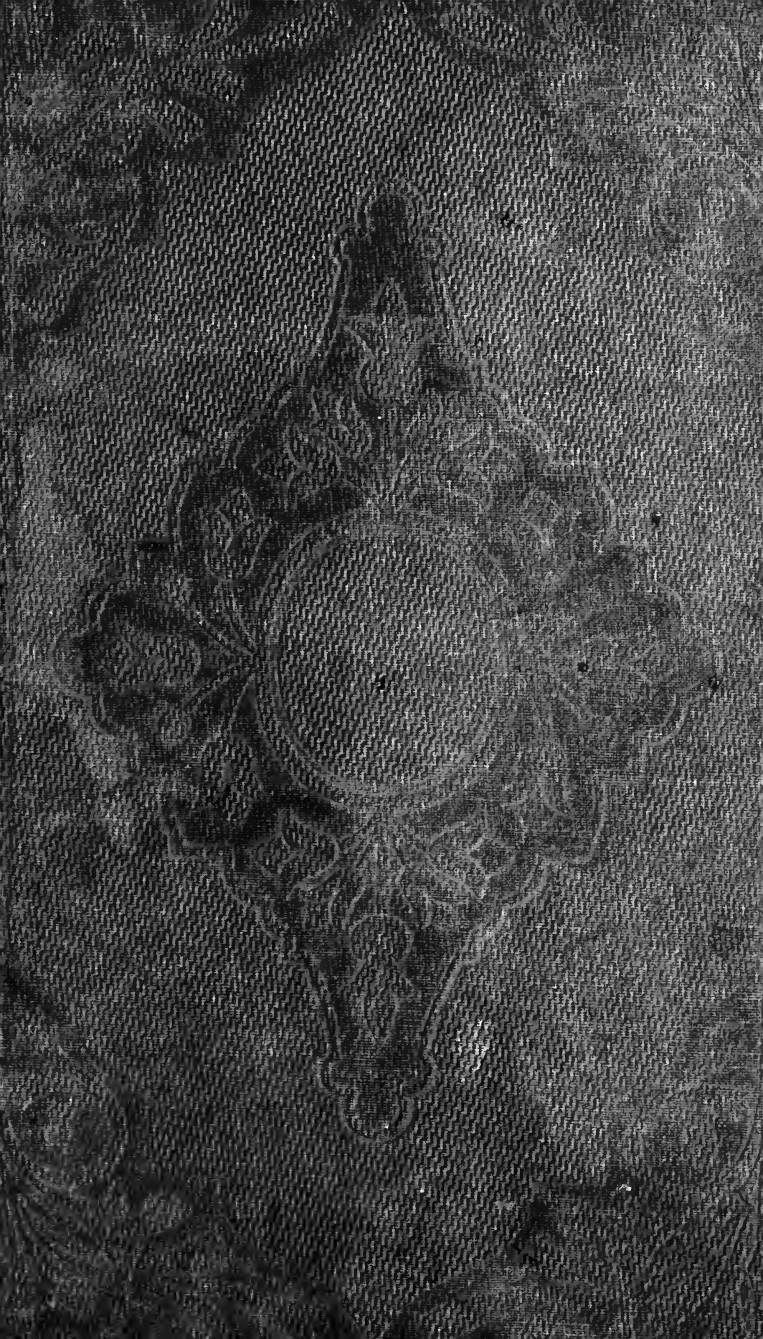
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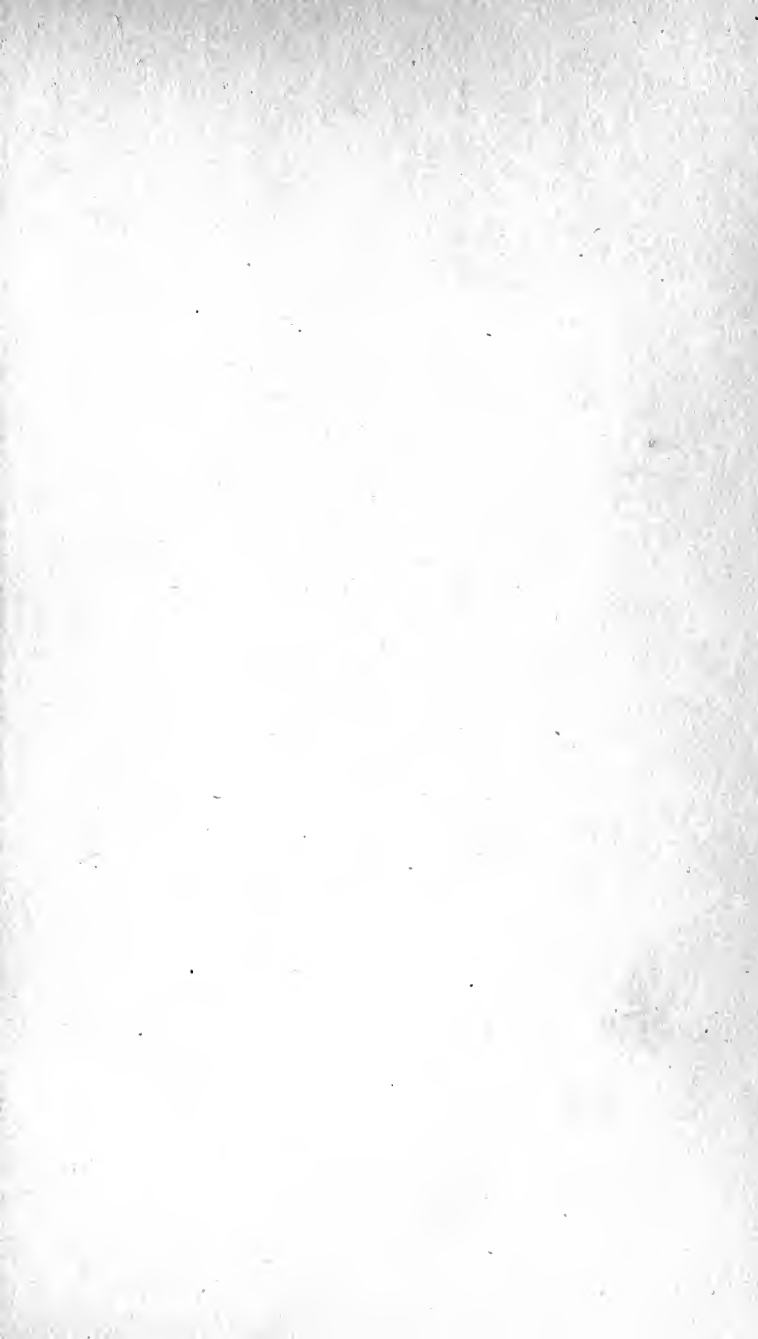
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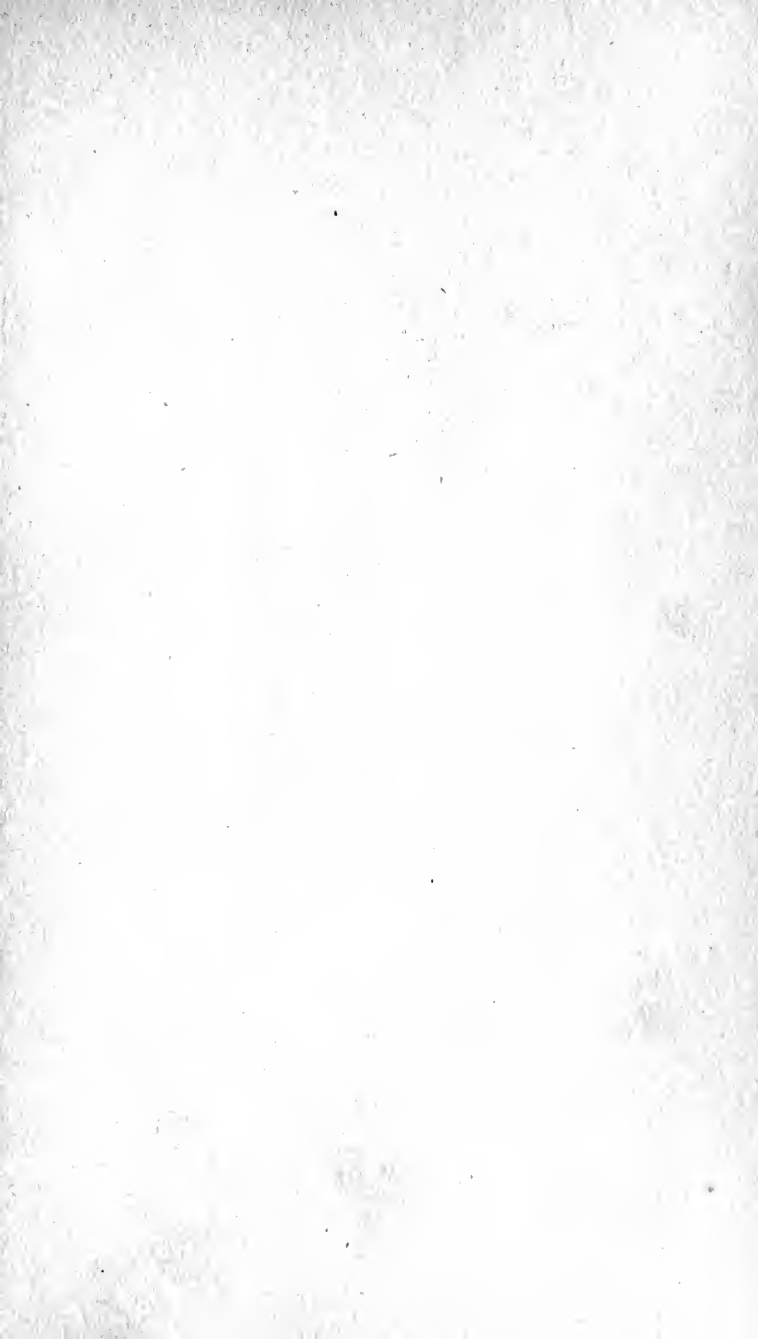












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